

Discipleship and Choices

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Sunday, 23rd August, 2009, by the Rev'd Pauline Main, based on the

Bible readings: Joshua 24: 1 - 2a; 14 – 18; John 6: 56 – 69; Ephesians 6: 10 - 18

There were a number of themes in our readings today - one is about **choices** - *"choose this day whom you will serve ...as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD"*

Joshua

The lectionary text comes at the end of the book of Joshua. Joshua has led the people into Caanan, the promised land. They have fought their battles and been living there for some time. They are being influenced by the society around them - perhaps particularly the new generation, born into that society.

Joshua is an old man who will not be with his people for much longer. He is preparing them for the future

He summons the people to Shechem to renew their covenant with God. He recounts the history of this covenant relationship, challenges the people make their choice as to whether it is God they want to serve.

Scholars tell us that the text of the book of Joshua came to its final form during the exile in Babylon, so the message here is also addressed to the **people in exile**, when again their loyalty to God is being tested, and they have to make a choice about where their loyalties lie.

John

In the reading from John's gospel, we hear how those who have been following Jesus and listening to his teaching begin to make a choice about whether they will continue to follow.

In Ch 6 Jesus talks about himself as the bread of life - the one who has come down from heaven, bringing spiritual nourishment as their ancestors received manna from heaven. Jesus who is at one with God the Father, sent by him.

Throughout this chapter Jesus' words have been greeted with misunderstanding, confusion, and objection from the crowd - referred to in the gospels as "they" or "the Jews."

In verse 60, we hear about the reaction from the people John refers to as the "disciples" - not the 12 but the wider group of those who have been following and have been close to Jesus.

But even for them, all this is too difficult and perplexing - they begin to fall away.

So, another theme emerges here - the acknowledgment that it is **not always easy to be a disciple** -

⁶⁶ *Because of this [hard teaching] many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.* ⁶⁷ *So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"* ⁶⁸ *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

Hymn - Once to every man and nation,

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Offering each the bloom or blight
And the choice goes by for ever
'Twixt that darkness and that light

I almost chose it for today - I like the tune! And most of the words. But I didn't choose it, because I don't think I really agree with the sentiment in that verse, that our choice comes only once. Choices come all the time in our life of faith! We are continually challenged to decide between "truth and falsehood" in our own day to day lives.

Another verse of the hymn does make this plain -

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.

We are challenged in our own lives - and challenged to reflect on the wider world and try to discern what is truth and what is not. Not an easy task with some of the modern-day ethical issues - think of the debates about assisted suicide, about our attitudes to homosexuality, genetic engineering, about how we deal with those who have committed offences, particularly horrific ones - is it right to be compassionate to Ronnie Biggs, to the Lockerbie bomber? What about the mother of Baby P? Those choices are not directly ours, but our thinking, our voices need to be there in the climate of public opinion.

And yes, discipleship is difficult -

- the "why" questions get in the way - if God is good, why is this happening to me, to someone I care about; why do these things happen in the world.
- Life gets in the way - our responsibilities to our families, our neighbours, our jobs, our community work. These are part of our discipleship, but we can become detached from God, doing them in our own way, rather than being rooted in our faith.

How do we deal with all this? There are some **hopeful signs** in our passages.

Joshua's words - you make your choice. *...as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*

The history of faithful discipleship, the example of people of faith down the ages - can be an inspiration to us.

Peter's words

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Peter, for all his failings is a man of faith and insight.

For him, the choice is no choice. However difficult, he has seen in Jesus something compelling, something which shows God's way

His response to Jesus is not a word of despair or a statement that they will have to settle for Jesus because there is nothing else. Peter and the others who remain have been given the gift of knowing that Jesus is the one who can give genuine life.

An insight that **we too are invited to share.**

God's protection - the armour of God

Ephesians passage, which we've not looked at yet, which speaks of God's protection for us – the image of putting on protective armour against the evils which surround us. The passage uses that strong kind of language.

It is a reminder that the church/Christians have to live in a hostile world - perhaps we feel this more in our society today than in the immediate past, where a secular agenda seems to be gaining ground in public life.

The military imagery of the passage can be offputting. But we can recall that an issue for the Christians to whom this letter was first written - a **difficult choice** they had to make - was whether they would worship God as revealed in Jesus Christ or the Roman emperor who claimed to be a god, and whose power was seen to represent cosmic forces.

And we can notice that the author, perhaps Paul, is looking back to Isaiah 59, one place in the Old Testament where God appears as a divine warrior who will bring about justice.

As in Isaiah 59:17, the "armour of God" includes "the breastplate of righteousness" (Ephesians 6:14), and "the helmet of salvation" (Ephesians 6:17).

The emphasis is about **relying on God's strength and not our own**

v10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power

I think it is the opposite of that song "My way", made popular by Frank Sinatra. We are called to do it "God's way".

The passage goes on to indicate the **source** of the strength - **faith, righteousness, the gospel and the word of God.** The **whole** armour.

And the importance of **prayer**

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints ..

- to gain strength for ourselves – it is the way we keep close to God.

and strength for others. Our strength is derived from God's strength.

The passage is addressed to the **whole community of the church.**

In Isaiah 59 the language indicates that "there was no one to intervene" (59:16), and so God fights for justice alone.

But Ephesians' use of the imagery, it is the community of the faithful that takes up this armour and becomes active in the struggle, alongside God.

So perhaps to close, the final verse of that hymn I didn't choose -

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

Life is full of choices, and as Christians we are called to make difficult choices, to take a road which is not always a comfortable one. But the scriptures tell us that the God who comes to us in the person of Christ offers us his love and protection, if we will stay close to him.