

Pentecost 13, Year C

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33

Choice! Our readings today are full of choice, choices to be faced, choices to be made. Paul, in the Epistle, has made the choice to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Onesimus must decide whether to go, knowing that legally, as a runaway slave, he faces death. And Philemon must decide whether to have Onesimus back as a brother and employ him as a free man, re-enslave him, or have him killed.

In our gospel reading Jesus invites us to choose to follow him whole heartedly above all else. And in Deuteronomy God simply says, "Choose life."

Of course, we are all familiar with choice. It is an everyday part of life. Even today we have made choices, whether or not to come to church and what we will wear. And now we are here we continue to make choices, either deliberately or by default, such as whether to actively worship God as we engage in singing the hymns and saying the words. Whether we really do believe the words we speak in the Creed and whether we pray as we listen to the intercessions.

Some choices are more important than others as our bible readings indicate. Our cross on a ballot paper is more important than whether we choose to wear the blue or the white shirt. Our readings deal with important choices.

Choose life, God says. Well, that could be a strap line for this Season of Creation, couldn't it? Its actual strapline is "Listen to creation" with its symbol the burning bush from Exodus 3; a bush that burned without being burnt up in order to catch Moses' attention so that he would listen to and obey the LORD.

Way back in Genesis we learn that God has given humankind dominion over, and therefore responsibility for, creation. Having dominion over it means that we can make the wrong choice as well as the right. Now God is asking us to "listen to creation", to perform an audit of humankind's effects on the planet and exercise our dominion in response. And I hope that we shall consider this a little bit more over the next three weeks.

But, of course, the burning bush in Exodus 3 was not a device to get Moses to listen to creation but to listen to God. And that is the thought underlying the reading in Deuteronomy – hearing and obeying God. "Choose life" in this context means just that, *loving the LORD your God obeying his voice and holding fast to him.*

This is the predominant message that God wants to get across. Holding fast to him is the most important thing. And whether we will do this or not is the choice that Jesus asks us to make.

He uses strong words. *Hate* is a bit extreme, isn't it? Surely Jesus doesn't really mean that, does he? Well, to answer that I think we need to recognise something here. Jesus, like other rabbis, used hyperbolic language.

For instance, he tells us twice in Matthew (5:29 & 18:9) that *if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away*. Now I'm sure he didn't mean that literally; the physical action would hardly stop us from sinning. Jesus is using exaggeration, hyperbole, to make a point, and so it is here. Matthew's rendering of this teaching is (Matthew 10:37-38):

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

Strong words still but it is a question not of hating, but of priorities. A matter of, when the chips are down, where is our priority allegiance. But saying that does not let us off the hook, as it were; they are still strong words. Jesus is demanding wholehearted devotion to him. Or as God puts it in Deuteronomy, make sure that you love God, listen to him and hold fast to him. No half measures. The test is not about hating but whether we are more devoted to Jesus than to our family members, or ourselves. And that's a very hard test!

And what is this about taking up our cross? It's a phrase isn't it – "it's my cross to bear"? It is an idiom that has entered our everyday language. "Oh, my interfering mother-in-law, my stammer, my whatever-it-is is just my cross to bear" as if that somehow makes us more saintly. But this usage didn't occur until the 1500s so it's not what Jesus meant.

So what did he mean? What does it mean to take up our cross? I think we can get a clue from Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."* Jesus was thinking about his imminent crucifixion. He didn't want to take up the cross. But in faithfulness and obedience to his Father Jesus laid aside his own wishes and instead did indeed take up the cross of crucifixion.

Jesus asks us to do the same. Not to be physically crucified, not even to bear with the mother-in-law although we may be called to do that too, but to set aside our own desires and instead hold fast to Jesus and follow him in

obedience to his desires, even when we don't want to, even when it is painful. And it's costly.

Jesus makes this plain when he asks his listeners to suppose they want to build a tower, or to consider a king who wants to go to war against a stronger enemy. He is speaking against the backdrop of the Jews' desire to complete the building of Herod's magnificent, monumental temple— which was never finished before it was destroyed by the occupying Roman forces in AD70 – and the Jewish desire to defeat the Romans and kick them out which, when they tried, resulted in total devastation of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Jesus says count the cost. We read that he is in fact talking to the large crowds who were following him, hangers-on maybe rather than true disciples. Jesus is suggesting that would-be disciples count the cost before signing up, just like the builder and the king who might be taking on more than they can chew.

And I wonder whether we counted the cost of being a true follower of Jesus when we signed up, as it were. Did we know? Did anyone tell us?

Are we totally devoted to him, holding fast to him, no matter what may be round the corner, no matter what it may cost? Or are we camp followers, hangers-on?

The question kind of brings us back full circle to where we were when I spoke a couple of weeks ago. Then I urged that when we talk to others about what we believe, and what we would like them to believe too, that we present the real deal, not a cosy, feel-good, Christianity, a “low-cost” and “low-risk” commodity as Michael Knowles put it in the book ‘The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables’.

Being a Christian, being a disciple of Jesus is a costly business, and I don't just mean financially. If it is costing us nothing more than our financial contribution to the church then perhaps we need to discuss with the Lord whether we have missed some area where he is calling for our obedience, some area where our desires are taking precedence over his, some area where he wants us to choose life, his life. Amen

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