

Sunday 4th September

Deuteronomy 30:15-end

Philemon

Luke 14:25-33

Choices

Tomorrow we will know who our new Prime Minister is. About 160,000 people across the country – all members of the Conservative Party – have been making their choice between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak.

Whatever we may think of the rights and wrongs of a relatively small number of people making a decision that will have massive consequences for all of us, we can acknowledge that the choices those people have made are very significant ones.

Of course not all choices are like that.

We make choices every moment of the day.

When to get up; what to wear; what to have for breakfast. All through the day we make choices. Most are fairly unimportant in the great way of things, but sometimes we have to make really important choices. Maybe you are facing up to one at the moment; if not I am sure you can remember one such choice you have had to make in the past.

How do we make those kinds of choices? What factors influence us?

All three of our readings today are about choices.

The reading from Deuteronomy sees the nation of Israel on the verge of entering the promised land. They have been wandering for many years since they left captivity and slavery behind in Egypt. If we take a look at the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy we can read about the journey they had been on. Read about the times when the people trusted God; read about the times when they turned away from him; read about the times when things seemed so bad that they complained about leaving Egypt; read about the times when God provided for them; and read about the way Moses led them.

And here they are – on the verge of entering this long promised land. A land – if you recall – flowing with milk and honey. A fruitful and productive land. Moses was old – he knew his days were limited, and he knew that he would

not be entering the promised land. What we read is the last time he spoke to the people

So he sets before the people this choice. It's a choice about whether they should continue or not to trust in the God who has led them through the wilderness once they are settled in the promised land. It's a choice which lays before them great promises and stark warnings. It's a choice between life and death. And Moses urges them to Choose Life!

Surely this is one of those easy choices to make. The benefits of one course of action clearly outweigh the consequences of the other. And it appears if we read on that on that day the Israelites made the easy and right choice. They chose life.

But it wasn't always easy. If we continue to read on through the story of Israel in the Bible, we see that sometimes following God seemed to be harder and more challenging than the alternative. And many fell away.

And that shouldn't surprise us. In the gospel Jesus is talking about similar things. He is talking about the challenges of following him. I guess there was a temptation for people to think it would all be easy, all be straightforward. Blessing after blessing. After all, the things Jesus was teaching were very attractive; his actions and miracles seemed to be doing away with all the things that hold us back. He talked of love and forgiveness. But here Jesus is telling those potential followers to count the cost before setting out. Make sure you know what you are letting yourself in for.

And he seems to be saying that the challenges which could stop us following him will largely be in terms of things we put in God's place. Money, possessions, family and so on. It's not so much the hard things of life that cause us to stop following him; it's the good things which tempt us into believing that we don't need God. That we can do it alone.

And this is what happened to the people of Israel of course. Once they had settled in the green and pleasant promised land. Once the occupiers were conquered, the houses were built, and the harvests were gathered in there didn't seem to be that need of God protecting and providing. And they began to turn away from God. Many turned to the gods of the people around them – gods that made little demand on them; gods that didn't challenge them in the way they lived.

The life God offered the Israelites – the fullness of life Jesus offers to all who follow him – including ourselves – is about putting God first. It's about recognising that all we have and all we are comes from God. It doesn't belong to us, it is ours to share.

We are so conditioned into thinking that happiness and contentment comes from what we have that we can fail to grasp this. True contentment; true fulfilment; true life comes from recognising that everything is God's. Our homes, our money, our families, our possessions, our talents – ultimately they all come from God. They are God's gift to us. Only when we acknowledge that are we free to enjoy life – freed from the burden that all those things can place upon us. This doesn't necessarily mean we have to sell everything and renounce everything. Rather, its about not being owned by the things we possess and love.

It is counter cultural. It was in Moses time; it was in Jesus' time but it is even more so in our 'all out for what we can get' materialistic world. But true fulfilment can only come when we do this.

So the choice to follow God – the life choice from Deuteronomy or the discipleship choice from Jesus – is not a choice we can make once and then forget about. That initial choice gets us our coat on ready to go for a walk; the daily choices we make to put God at the centre ensure we keep walking.

And those day to day ongoing choices are not always easy.

Take the story of Philemon and Onesimus in the NT reading. On first reading its hard for us to grasp what's going on here this because the story is so wrapped in its culture.

Philemon was clearly a wealthy person who, as all wealthy people did in those times, had slaves. Philemon was also a follower of Jesus. But at that time slavery was not seen as an evil. We might wonder how that could be. But the fact it wasn't makes me wonder what in 100 years time people will look back at us and say – how could they have believed that was OK? Issues to do with the way we abuse and misuse the planet? Our attitude to those of different sexual identity or orientation? The gross imbalance of wealth? Who knows?

Anyway, that's another sermon.

Philemon was a believer – he came to faith when Paul preached in Colossae where he lived - and he had slaves. One of his slaves Onesimus had run away – an offence punishable by death. And he had probably stolen some money in the process. And he had fled to Rome

We can guess that his money ran out, and that somehow he found himself listening to Paul preach about Jesus. It made sense to Onesimus and he became a Christian, a follower of Jesus. As time went on Paul became very

fond of him – treating him as a father would treat a child - and presumably Onesimus trusted Paul enough to tell him his story – perhaps in some kind of confessional.

And here's where the choices have to be made. Each of the three characters has to make a choice. And each choice will be influenced by their Christian faith – their following of Jesus. The choice they had made for life.

Paul – He knew Philemon. Should he tell Onesimus this? Should he tell Philemon what he had been told by Onesimus? Should he keep this knowledge quiet. Surely if he said anything it would just open a hornets nest. Or should he follow the example of Jesus and seek to reconcile these two brothers in faith?

He chose the path of life – the path of reconciliation – and so wrote the letter

Onesimus. Paul wanted him to go back to Philemon and face up to his past. To do so would mean taking a huge risk. His owner had the right to have him killed or abused. Forgiveness in such circumstances was unheard of. Let alone being treated as a brother. Should he do as Paul asked him, or should he simply run away again? Was his new found faith worth that risk?

Philemon – what should he do when he received Paul's letter. How should he react when Onesimus came? His slave had run away, and here was Paul asking him not just to welcome him back as a slave – but as a brother. As an equal. Could he do this?

We don't know the outcomes of Philemon's or Onesimus's choices – but perhaps we can guess. I would like to think that their lives had been changed so much by their faith – their life choice to follow Jesus – that they were reconciled and able to live as Christian brothers.

So much for their choices – what about the choices we make each day. They are probably not all as significant as those of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus but they are important to us in the way we lead our lives.

Is the Jesus who we say we follow at the centre of our lives as we make our choices? Does the way we live day by day reflect the words we say as we worship him? Is our faith really an everyday faith or one just for church on Sundays?

The challenge that Moses gave to the people of Israel is one we would do well to consider each day.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. -
Choose life! The choice is ours.