

Choose Life

Readings: Deut. 30: 15-20 & Matt. 5: 21-37

Prayer

Lord, may our minds be open to hear and understand what you are saying to us this morning; may our hearts embrace it; and may our wills be ready to obey your word. Through Christ our Lord, Amen

Intro

I wonder how many of you saw the picture of the Australian guy who just managed to keep his nose above water for five hours as he waited for help to come. Or maybe you remember the story of a trapper whose leg was trapped under a boulder and who had the courage to tie a tourniquet and then cut off his lower leg so that he could free himself and crawl to find help. A grisly story, isn't it? But it illustrates how strong the human survival instinct is. Why then is God, through Moses, urging people to choose life – it sounds like a bit of a no-brainer? Surely almost everyone would choose life rather than death. Perhaps there is a bit more to it, and 'life' in this context means more than just the opposite of death. On the other hand, I don't think it applies in the first instance to eternal life, or life in the age to come. The context in our OT reading is very much a setting here on earth so probably we need to go back and look at the original context of that passage to find out what Moses meant when he asked the Israelites to choose life. What I want to do this morning is to begin by looking at our OT reading, then see how this is related to our NT reading, and finally suggest some ways in which these two readings can help us live as followers of Jesus today.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

First we need to look at the context or setting for our OT reading. Picture the scene: The Israelites have a massive camp somewhere near the borders of Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses has ordered everyone to turn out to hear what he has to say: leaders and labourers, men, women and children, native-born and foreigners (Deut. 29:10-11). He even includes those "Not here today," that is future generations who haven't been born yet. Moses begins by reminding them of what some of them had seen with their own eyes, 40 years ago now. How God had defeated Pharaoh and freed them from slavery in Egypt; how He had provided for them during their wanderings in the wilderness and now here they were poised to cross the River Jordan and enter Canaan. Not only that they were fresh from victories over some of the Transjordan kings whose land was now being settled by some of the Israelite tribes. They were on a roll.

But moving into Canaan was a significant event. It is a solemn occasion as Moses asks them to recommit themselves to the covenant God had made with them at Mount Sinai. God had promised that He would be their God and they would continue to be His people IF they obeyed His commands. These included not only the Ten Commandments but also a series of laws and instructions. There were some 600 of these covering almost everything from sacrifices and ceremonial law, to what to wear and what to eat and even what to do if the animal you are looking after as a favour for a friend gets injured or ups and dies on you. In that sense Judaism is not so much a series of beliefs as a way of life. So when Moses urges the people to choose life he is not so much presenting a choice between life and death as asking them to choose a way of life that will enable them to flourish in their new land, rather than choose a way of living that will result in the consequences of disobedience – droughts, crop diseases, locusts, border raids, invasion and occupation.

Moses sets out the blessings for obedience, and the curses which would be a consequence of disobedience and then gives them the opportunity to renew their commitment to the Covenant. Let's look at what they had to do or not do in verses **15-18**. What are they to do?

- To love the Lord your God
- To walk in obedience to him
- To keep his commands, decrees and laws.

And what are they to not do?

- Let their heart turn away
- Be disobedient
- Be drawn to other gods and bow down and worship them.

There are a couple of points I want to pick up here because, as Christians, we often have misunderstandings about the OT Law. In the past we may have been taught that the Jews thought they were saved through obeying the Law, but of course, they had already been saved, rescued from slavery in Egypt before the Law was given. As Chris Wright says:

“Obedience to the law in the OT ... was not the means of attaining salvation but the response to a salvation already experienced.”

Nor was obedience regarded as too hard to achieve. Verses 11-13 tell us:

“Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?”

As John Goldingay puts it – you don’t need a PhD to understand what God is asking of you. 99% of the time it’s not that we don’t know what to do, it’s whether we are prepared to do it! That applies to us as much now as it did back in Moses’ time.

Think about it, the very fact that we are given a choice to obey it means that obedience must be possible. Chris Wright again:

“The idea that God deliberately made the law so exacting that nobody would ever be able to live by it belongs to a distorted theology that tries unnecessarily to gild the gospel by denigrating the law.”

This is why the psalmists often claim to have lived according to God’s law, a claim that often grates on our, or at least my, ears. But what they are claiming is not some sort of sinless perfection – because they also regularly confess their sins and ask for forgiveness - rather they are saying that they are broadly living in a way that is pleasing to God. It is why they can delight in God’s law, as John pointed out a couple of weeks ago.

Psalm 119:111-112

“Your statutes are my heritage for ever; they are the joy of my heart. My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.”

Did you notice how much the heart is involved? In Deuteronomy 30:14 we read:

Deuteronomy 30:14

“The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”

Obedience is a matter of the heart. In v16 the command to love God comes before the command to walk in obedience. Even for Israel the law is not merely an external code.

Just listen to how relational all this is:

Deuteronomy 30: 19b-20

“Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God and listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life.”

What then is life? What does it mean to choose life? In the words of v16, life is loving God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments. In v19, it is loving God, listening to God and holding fast or being loyal to God. Ultimately life is not found in the law but in the God who gave it.

But lest we get too super-spiritual let's get back to the context. Moses is offering the choice between loving God and following his commands, because he also recognizes that as the Israelites move into Canaan and settle down in villages and towns they are going to have to decide what sort of society they want, what sort of values they will live by. Law and God's law in particular will have a crucial part to play in determining what it will be like for ordinary men and women to live in Israel. How just, equitable and peaceful will society be?

Unfortunately, starting in the Book of Judges, we see that Israel didn't always live up to its commitment to God's covenant. Time and again they were under attack or invaded and eventually were taken into exile in Babylon. By Jesus' time they had returned from exile but were still under Roman occupation and that leads us into a look at our NT reading.

Matthew 5:21-37

Before we look at the passage we had read to us I want to point out some similarities in the contexts of our Old and New Testament readings that it is easy to miss. Remember in Deuteronomy the Israelites had been rescued from slavery in Egypt, had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and were now about to enter the Promised Land and establish their own territory. While, at this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has returned from Egypt, has spent 40 days in the wilderness and is now on a mountain teaching his people about the kingdom of heaven (same as kingdom of God ie on earth not in heaven) and how to live as members of his newly formed society of disciples. What sort of attitudes, values and behaviours society will be expected in this new kingdom? And, since as Christians we are also members of that kingdom, what will be expected of us?

The first point to make is that Jesus himself says that he has not come to abolish or do away with the law but to fulfil it (5:17). This means we can expect some degree of continuity with the teaching of the OT but also anticipate that Jesus will transcend or go beyond traditional interpretations of the law. He will go deeper, and that, in fact, is what we find in the examples in Matthew 5:21-37 as Jesus draws out the implications of what was taught in the OT.

So, in **verses 21-22** Jesus teaches that the OT law on murder, the sixth commandment, implicitly also prohibits the anger and abusive language that can lead to murder. He is tackling an inner attitude, and he uses the Greek word *orgē* which describes a brooding inner anger rather than a sudden outburst of temper. Such an attitude towards a 'brother,' that is a fellow member of the faith community, is not going to make for harmonious, open and loving relationships among Christians. When we remember that love for one another is supposed to be a defining characteristic of a Christian community you can see why Jesus takes this so seriously.

You may have heard of people who are described as 'consumed by anger.' Tom Wright gives us this warning: "Every time you decide to let your anger smoulder on inside you, you are becoming a little less than fully human. ... the fire inside you may eventually become all that's left of you, as Gehenna,- the smouldering garbage dump of ancient Jerusalem – may take over completely."

What's the answer – be reconciled says Jesus(v23-24), even if it means putting off worshipping God until you have sorted things out. In the 1662 Prayer Book those wanting to take Communion are advised that they are to be "in love and charity with their neighbours," before they come for Communion. It was a salutary weekly reminder of the quality of relationships we should be aiming for within our church family, and the need to put things right when they have gone wrong. Indeed, if the matter between you and your adversary has led to a court case, Jesus urges his followers to sort out their differences or face more serious consequences (vv25-26).

Jesus then turns his attention to the seventh commandment which prohibits adultery, and again he addresses the inner attitude which allows itself to dwell on adulterous thoughts. Jesus is really serious about this. He uses hyperbolic (or extreme) language to describe the taking of whatever measures are necessary to deal decisively with the

problem. The loss of one part of the body is better than the loss of the whole person to the fires of Gehenna, he says.

Jesus' teaching on divorce follows on from this probably because of the association with adultery. Much could be said on this topic but this morning I will only say that this is another example of the fractured relationships that can arise in any community and which cause pain to all involved.

Lastly, Jesus' concern for right relationships within the communities of his followers may also lie behind his condemnation of oaths and his insistence that all that is needed is a plain yes or no. When society can no longer operate in an atmosphere of trust then all sorts of checks and balances, rules and regulations have to be put in place which can result in frustration, and cynical mistrust and suspicion. As Jesus' followers we should be careful to be people of our word both as a witness to the watching world and also as an important contributing factor in building trusting relationships within our faith communities.

Today's context

Finally, I want to look very briefly at what all this means for us today? As a community of God's people here at Holy Trinity we are looking forward to the journey that God will take us on in 2017, particularly, we hope, the building of our new church hall. More importantly, perhaps we can be thinking about what it will mean for us as individuals and as a community to 'choose life' - to make a commitment:

- To love the Lord our God
- To walk in obedience to him
- To keep his commands, decrees and laws.
- To not let our hearts turn away or be distracted
- And to not allow ourselves to be drawn to other gods, be they pleasure, work, money or whatever.

We are to love God – all of us have different ways of expressing our love for other people and for God, but telling him we love him, allowing him to love us, and spending time with him in worship and prayer will almost certainly be part of this.

We are to walk in obedience to him – that means listening to what he says and doing it. Our Lent course on prayer aims to help us be better at listening to God.

We will obey his commands – not all the 600 of the OT but all that can be brought under the umbrella of loving one another and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

Then we are to not turn away from God or let other things become more important in our lives. Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22. He asked Jesus what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus replies: “If you want to enter life keep the commandments.” The man says he has been doing this all his life and asks: “What do I still lack?” Jesus gets to the heart of his problem when he says: “Go sell your possessions and give to the poor.” But this is a step too far for the man and he turns sorrowfully away. It was just this one thing that he had made more important in his life. We may need to ask ourselves – what might that one thing be for us?

You know, it is interesting that these commands were presented to the whole community but were expressed in the second person singular – that is to you and me as individuals. In other words, we each have make that choice or commitment for ourselves. As we do so, let us remember that what we are committing ourselves to is not so much the laws as the giver of the laws, the Lord who is our life. Amen.