

Counting the cost

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Viv Bridges* on the 8th September, at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 10.00am.

Deuteronomy, ch. 30, vv. 15 – 20, Philemon, vv. 1 – 21 and Luke, ch. 14, vv. 25 - 33.

Last week Peter and I decided the kitchen needed spring cleaning. We decided we'd ask the people who usually keep us clean to do it, so we fixed it up – all nice and easy. Then we realised that we had to empty out all the cupboards! and the drawers! and the shelves! It took us ages. The cleaning was done beautifully – and then, of course, we had to put everything back – washing things that had collected dust for months (years?). Something we thought would be easy turned out to be exhausting!

Jesus use similar examples to warn people that they should weigh up very carefully what following him really meant. Moses, on the other hand, made 'choosing for God' seem rather simple. 'See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity'. Who would not 'choose life and prosperity' rather than death and adversity? Moses' invitation didn't mention how difficult 'choosing life' is in reality, and, in fact, a few verses before this, Moses said 'What I am commanding you today is not too difficult or beyond your reach'. But by the time Moses spoke these words, the Israelites had been wandering in the desert for a very long time. Their initial promise to obey God had released them from their slavery in Egypt, but had led them to having to live off 'manna' (probably a bit like the wafers we use for communion) and water from a rock. All of this was a far cry from the abundance of food in Egypt. Also, by now, 'The Law' had been given to Moses with the many rules and regulations that made it extremely difficult to live up to what God expected.

'Choosing life', then, didn't seem to offer much 'fun', and there hadn't been much sign of that 'prosperity' that Moses promised. It's true that the outcome of not choosing for God had been demonstrated several times during the Israelites wanderings (there had been much death and adversity), but they had soon forgotten this as they discovered how hard it was to put obedience to God's law into practice. Moses, then, presented the two options very simplistically, leaving out the difficulties. But Jesus made those difficulties absolutely clear.

Jesus frequently warned people that to follow him may mean taking up a cross, it may mean 'losing our life'. He said that, if we choose to follow him, any attachment we have to things of the world must be put to one side. Our desire to follow Christ must always come first - even before our family and friends. Usually it does not mean that we have to 'put aside' the people we love - our love of them is part of our love of God. But there might be occasions when someone close to us asks us to do something that doesn't fit in with Christ's way. Following Christ may lead to division within families because we may feel pulled in two directions, but Jesus' instruction is quite clear – we must follow him.

If we 'choose for God' we also have to be prepared to put aside material possessions. This doesn't necessarily mean that we have to become poor, but the Bible makes it quite clear that we must put any riches/wealth we possess at God's disposal. We must use them, not for our own gratification, but for God. And we have to be prepared to put aside any desire for status/fame. Mark spoke eloquently last week about the place of ambition for Christians. Following Christ does not mean we should never look to move forward in life, but it does mean that we must do all that we can to try to make sure that what we are doing is for GOD, not for our own pride – or JUST for the increase in salary!

Following Christ also means that we have to try to go out of our way to accept, support, forgive others, whoever they are, often not very easy. It means 'going the extra mile', which is what Paul was asking Philemon to do in his letter to him. Onesimus was Philemon's slave and had obviously run away from Philemon, stealing some money. Paul had found him, and had converted him, and found him very useful. Paul is therefore writing to Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Philemon could punish him severely or even put him to death, but Paul urges him not to do either, and even to grant him his freedom. Paul does not condemn 'slavery' as such – this would probably not have entered his head, it was such an integral part of life - but he does instruct Christians who have slaves to treat them with respect, look after them with kindness. This was certainly not something that society felt was an obligation, and so it was an example of what 'choosing for Christ' meant in those early days.

Jesus, then, is quite blunt about what choosing to follow him meant and so he urged people to think very carefully before they 'signed on the dotted line'. I find it very troubling today when I occasionally hear people trying to convert others to Christianity by offering them an apparently very simple choice; 'If you say yes to Jesus Christ in your lives then everything will be fine'. It isn't like that. Saying yes to Christ doesn't make everyday life easier, we have to hand over the control of our lives to God (not an easy thing in this day and age), we have to put others first, and we have to bear the difficulties that life will bring us.

So – why on earth should we say yes? Well – there is that promise of 'eternal life' when we die, but even committed Christians can't really say what this means – or if it's really true, there's no scientific evidence. So it seems rather a vague, long-way off reward. And then there's that 'threat' of death and adversity if we don't 'sign up', but it doesn't seem to affect many of those around us who obviously only want to look after themselves. Sometimes we may feel like the writer of psalm 73 'I envied the proud and saw the prosperity of the wicked for they suffered no pain, and their bodies are sleek and sound ' ... ' it goes on like this. These are surely very human reactions to the wealth and prosperity of some of those around us! The psalmist did discover that eventually these 'wicked people' did get their comeuppance .. 'you cast them down in ruin'. I suspect we're all secretly rather pleased when we hear that those who have been self-seeking have finally got the reward they deserve; those celebrities who thought they could take advantage of children and abuse them with impunity, or people who have amassed vast wealth, but who have died lonely, friendless. But I suspect that we shouldn't really even allow ourselves this self-satisfaction. Christ commands us to love all people – not to condone their behaviour, but to acknowledge that God loves them unconditionally, wants them turn to him, and wants to forgive them.

So – again – why says yes? Because people do. You and I, along with many others, have come to church to worship God this morning. Many reasons, of course. For some people it will be the result of a fairly intellectual decision. We hear of people who have read one of the Gospels and seen how much sense it makes, not just for Jesus in his time, but in the world today. For some it will be because their experience of Christians has been good, inspiring. We may be lucky enough to know people whose faith brings them an inner peace, strength, in spite of whatever happens to them. Or we may know Christians who do wonderful things for others. Through these people we see the love that Christ can bring into people's lives. But I believe that whatever brings people to make their first step towards God, for most people somewhere along the line something happens at a deeper personal level. There will be the beginnings of a personal experience of God's very real presence. Then, 'choosing life' is no longer *just* a question of 'reason', of 'duty'; it is a matter of the heart. However tough it may

make our life, we simply *have* to keep saying yes. And then a number of amazing things may happen.

We discover that, in fact, Moses was right when he said ‘it is not too difficult, beyond your reach’. He went on to say ‘the word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart’. Moses meant ‘the Law’ but we might take ‘the Word’ to mean Jesus himself. We discover that, if we allow him in, Jesus is very near to us, he is in our heart. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus gives us the strength and guidance to battle through those hard things that he warned us about. And, perhaps even more importantly, we discover that it doesn’t matter if we get it wrong. It is very easy to give up something difficult if we are afraid of what will happen when we fail. Jesus assures us over and over again that we do not have to be afraid.

What matters is that we *want* to follow him. He understands our ‘human-ness’, and he will forgive us over and over again, so our failures don’t get in the way of our journey to him. And so we discover that we are accepted – just for who we are – warts and all, not for what we possess, or how important we are, or for how wonderful we look. Gradually we learn that ‘saying yes’ to Christ isn’t to avoid adversity in this life, or just to get a reward in the life beyond. It’s because, by saying yes, God’s Kingdom becomes a reality in the world. By saying yes, although the way may be hard and difficult, we allow God’s guidance, forgiveness, compassion and mercy, into our lives and the lives of others.

Through us, God’s unconditional love can be made real, in the world we live in, here and now.

Thanks be to God.

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