

Sunday 8th September 2019
Trinity 12 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 30.15-end)

NT: Philemon 1-21

G: Luke 14.25-33

Choose life.

I was tempted to end this sermon there. A quick 'Amen' and then we'll get on with the service.

What more could I add to that advice? Choose life. God, through Moses, setting before his people a stark but seemingly straightforward choice:-

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

Surely a no brainer. Choose life. But if you've ever tried to lose weight, give up smoking, take up daily exercise, you may realise it's not as easy as it seems. You're given all the right advice, you understand fully the health options, there's plenty of support to help you on your way.

But it's a struggle. The right way is seldom the easy way. We say, 'We're only human' as if that is a sufficient excuse. Perhaps that is the flaw of sin within us, that weakness comes easier than strength.

Ask the Israelites of the Old Testament. Having been rescued from slavery in Egypt. Having survived 40 years of travelling in the desert. They come at last to the Promised Land and all they have to do is follow these simple instructions:-

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But they don't. Like us, again and again they think they know best. They stray from God's ways until they get themselves in another mess and back them come to God pleading for help and salvation. The occasional cigarette turning into 5 and then 10 a day until once more it's out of our control.

In the previous passage of Deuteronomy, Moses says

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

But God saw that it was too hard for humankind, that our weakness caused us to falter and so God's Word was made flesh and Jesus came to show us that being human does not mean that we are doomed to always fail as long as we put our trust in God. As long as we set aside our own wishes and desires, as long as we commit ourselves to the will of the Father by taking up our cross and following the example of Jesus. It can seem like a hard directive, tough love.

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

But that's maybe the point. We've got confused about the definition of life.

It's not about self-indulgence. It's not a quiet, comfortable existence.

It's not about strolling along without a care in the world.

Life is sharing in God's very being. It's a force we can barely comprehend.

It is following the example of Jesus by slowly emptying out ourselves to make room for the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the words of T.S. Eliot *It's a condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)*

Today is 8th September and when it falls on any day but a Sunday, we keep the feast of the birth of Our Lady. When Mary said to the angel, *Be it done unto me according to your word.*

she surrendered all control over her life, she placed herself at God's mercy and allowed herself to become an instrument of his great plan for the salvation of humanity. Mary chose life, life as the Mother of God. A life in human terms that was filled with hardship and desperate sorrow.

At times she was shunned by society and even almost, by her own fiancé. She knew poverty and adversity, giving birth in a stable. She feared for the life on her infant child and was forced to live as a refugee in Egypt. And then she had to witness the death of her son, killed with great suffering as a common criminal. Not, on the surface, a life that you would want to aspire to.

But the life of Mary was rich beyond all human understanding, that simple surrender brought forth God's very being into this world. A girl of no great distinction became an integral part of the redemption of the human race.

Mary is an example of what life truly means. Not wealth in this world's terms which brings its own worries and narrow vision, caring only for ourselves and not the good of others.

Not how we look and a desperate attempt to cling on to youth so that we miss the blessings that each age brings.

Not even what we have achieved by the standards of this world. Others will come who may achieve more and in time our efforts will be forgotten.

Don't go down the easy route of pleasure-seeking and comfort. Take up your cross.

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you.

Amen.

The Revd Michelle Montrose