

LIFE'S CHOICES

Joshua 24:14-18, Mark 8:34-37 [MW20-42]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 15 November 2020

An Arab chief tells a story of a spy who was captured and then sentenced to death by a general in the Persian army. This general had the strange custom of giving condemned criminals a choice between the firing squad and the big, black door. As the moment of execution drew near, the spy was brought to the Persian general, who asked the question, "What will it be? The firing squad or the big, black door?" The spy hesitated for some time. It was a difficult decision. He chose the firing squad. Moments later shots rang out confirming his execution. The general turned to his aide and said, "They always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet, we gave him a choice." The aide said, "What lies beyond the big, black door?" "Freedom," replied the general. "I've only known a few brave enough to take it."

Choices!

- we might well ask why did God's people have to choose?

They had left Egypt, crossing the sea on dry land

- wandered forty years in the desert
- crossed the Jordan river on dry land
- defeated their enemies
- and taken possession of the land the Lord God had promised

And now, after all that, Joshua gathers all of God's people

- in a huge meeting at Shechem
- and confronts them with the challenge:
"Choose this day whom you will serve"

Choose!

- isn't obvious?
- haven't they already chosen?
- so why is Joshua making such a big deal out of it???
- because it is a big deal

Reflecting on this, it seems to me to be linked to what we might call "the human condition"

- the human condition of starting with a hiss and a roar
- full of enthusiasm and energy
- ... then quietly fizzling out

Perhaps like me you are aware how at the beginning of something

- people are keen, bubbling with excitement
- yes, yes, yes I'll never forget
- I'll be at the meeting, come to practice, be part of the team
- I'll do it every morning, every week, whenever you need me
- then a couple of months or years down the track
- things kind of drop off

Which is why Joshua stresses keeping the Covenant, following the Law

- and exclusive loyalty to the one who gave it
- because this is the very condition of existence
- Joshua wished to guard against people's perennial tendency to forget

Joshua was in a sense putting before people the question

- what are you going to do when the initial enthusiasm wears off?
when things become ordinary and humdrum?
- what will you do in the face of temptation and distraction
when the going gets tough

Joshua's challenge and encouragement is: REMEMBER

- remember the day when you made a choice, when you made a promise
remember and remain faithful and true
- remember also how the Lord God has been with you
has been faithful to you in the past
will be faithful to you in the future

Joshua reminded all those gathered

- of the special and unique history of the Hebrew people
they were the people God had chosen
- for the people of God are perhaps not so much a racial group, or a nation
rather they are a "folk" or a "people"
who are bound by their sacred story and their Covenant with the Lord God

Joshua puts before the people a choice – there are only two options

- one way leads to life
the other way leads to being cut off from life
- and people have to choose
there can be no sitting on the fence or waiting to see how things work out
- people are either in, or they are not

And so in the first Bible reading we heard Joshua say very clearly:

- as for me and my family ...
we will worship and obey the Lord
- this also highlights that it is not something done alone
it is done together
with group encouragement and support

In response to all Joshua said the people affirmed their decision to serve the Lord God

- and they marked this by making a Covenant
writing down the Law
and erecting a memorial stone beneath a sacred tree

In a sense that is what we do as we gather here in this place

- Sunday by Sunday
affirming our commitment to following the Lord God
supporting and encouraging each other
- for we are the people of God, the family of God, in this place

The Lord God is the one who is worthy to follow

- his promises are true
this gives us courage for the present
confidence to face the future
- and above all, hope

When we look back and look around, there is indeed none other like our God
- so we too are invited to make our choice
claim our place and live our life
as one of God's chosen people

Now I'm going to tell you about a guy
- who is just beginning to grasp what all this might be about
about choosing life
about following God
- and putting it into practice and passing it on

This again is that 'real bloke' who meets God
- for him it is no longer surprising
to have God burst in on his life at particular moments
- though it is of course challenging

This is titled "My Boys"

Read story

Joshua said: "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15)

Let us pray:
*O God our Creator, Redeemer and Life-giver,
we bless you for our creation.
The life we possess is your gift:
we hold it in trust from you.
Teach us to value it and use it to the full.
For we have but one life to live on earth,
one life in which to glorify you,
to serve your Church,
to advance your kingdom,
to help other people.
Show us what to do with our life,
that we might live wisely and well.
Amen.*

My Boys

Sometimes I watch the late movie on TV Sunday night. Kind of a way of unwinding and getting ready for the new week. Patti usually goes to bed and leaves me to it – reminding me to turn off the lights before I come to bed.

I was making my way down the hall after a particularly unmemorable film. I switched out the main light and switched on the night-light – for my boys. Then I went into their room to tuck them in. During the day Brandon and Paul could have their mother and me tearing our hair out! So much energy, into everything, constantly questioning. Yet now, tucked up in their beds asleep, my boys looked like little angels.

“Don’t they just!” whispered a voice behind me.

It was the Lord – who else would show up around midnight unannounced! “And,” he continued, “just you keep hold of that image of your boys as angels next time you’re angry with them.”

“I’ll try,” I replied. “But no matter what happens I’ll always love them. They’re my boys.”

“Mine too!” said the Lord. “And don’t you forget it.”

I turned to face the Lord. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just that the way you feel about your boys right now is the way I always feel about them. And you. And Patti too for that matter. I’m always watching over you.”

I’d never thought about it like that before. The Lord watching over me and my family. “Hey, thanks,” I said. “It’s really good to know you’re in there too. It’s a big responsibility being a parent ...”

“It is,” answered the Lord, “though it’s actually much simpler than some parents think. The most important thing is to love your children. Spend time with them. Let them know how important they are to you. And above all, listen to them. Listen to them tell you about how they see and understand things. Listen to them tell you about their world. It’ll keep you in touch with them – throughout life. And do you know something else?”

Of course I didn’t, but the Lord would tell me anyway; so I politely said, “No.”

“Keeping in touch with your boys’ world will keep you in touch with mine.”

“Yeah?” Maybe this faith and following thing was easier than I’d found it so far.

“That’s right,” said the Lord. “Next time you read Mark’s gospel look out for this: ‘Unless you accept the kingdom as a little child does ...’”

Then on the other hand, maybe it wasn’t so easy. But no harder than being a parent I supposed. There was a fine line between good discipline and stifling character. Between letting children explore and find out things for themselves and being over-protective.

“That’s right,” said the Lord, intruding on my thoughts but picking up in exactly the right place. Funny how he always managed to do that. “If you keep thinking along those lines maybe you’ll even begin to see how things are for me as everyone’s ‘Heavenly Parent’. But you’re right. Part of your job as a father is to protect your boys. Protect them from harm – that’s pretty straight forward. But also to protect them from growing up too soon ...”

“Growing up too soon?” I queried. I didn’t get it. When I was younger I couldn’t wait to grow up and get on with the big things, the real things in life ...

“Uh uh,” the Lord smiled. “Protect them from rushing through childhood. Help them keep the doors of possibility open. Childhood is a gift – and it only comes once.”

I thought about that for a bit as I watched Brandon and Paul sleeping, and remembered some of the things we’d done over the weekend. “Childhood is a gift for parents too,” I laughed. “You get to sit on the big cushions on the library floor and read all the neat books. You can play silly beggars in the park. You get to go places and do things that if you didn’t have children with you, they’d think you were crazy!”

The Lord seemed to agree. “I think you’ll get the hang of that Mark 10 verse pretty quickly!”

Paul made a snuffling noise, turned over and pulled the covers off his bed. I tucked him in again.

“Big plans for them?” asked the Lord.

“Not really,” I answered. “Just to do well at school. Do their best. Use their abilities. And be a good mate.”

“What about one of them being an All Black?”

I laughed. “Don’t think there’s much chance of that. If it happens, it happens – it would be great I guess. But I’m not going to worry about it. As long as they’re happy and enjoy what they do.”

“So I take it,” the Lord continued, “you’re not going to make them play rugby like you had to?”

I was flabbergasted. I’d never told anyone about that. Not even Patti. It was a horrible, horrible memory I’d done my best to forget. “You know about that?”

“Uh huh,” answered the Lord. “And how much you hated it. Worried about it. How you dreaded the winter season with its after school practices; and those awful early morning games. The endless teasing because you were – I’ll put this as politely as I can – almost totally without skill.” The Lord was nothing if not brutally honest!

“Yeah. Well I’m going to do my best to see these guys never have to go through anything like that.”

“Yes, but you went through it pretty much alone. With no one to talk to. No one to reassure you. No one to give you some extra special encouragement.”

“Well I’m going to make sure I’m there for these guys!”

“That’s great,” said the Lord. “I know you’ll do your best for them. And you’ll be superb. Top notch.”

“Really?”

“Of course! Only you can’t possibly be around, be with them, all the time. How are your boys going to know I’m there for them? That they have a Heavenly Father as well as an earthly one?”

“I dunno,” I said. Here it was getting late; me tired; and the Lord asking another curly question. Typical! I’d only been tucking the boys in on my way to bed when the Lord butted in and interrupted me. “Maybe I’ll send them to Sunday School. If necessary I could even take them to church ...”

“Highly commendable,” said the Lord in that tone that let you know it was most definitely **not** the right answer. He paused “... Did the Sunday School thing work for you?”

“Not really.” I was tired. Didn’t want to get into a deep discussion. “What would you recommend?”

To my surprise the Lord actually answered. Made a half decent suggestion. “Introduce your boys to me yourself. Read the Bible with them. Pray together. Do it all naturally as part of ordinary everyday life. Let the boys see what you do and how you do it. That’s really important because mostly your boys will learn from you.”

That was a scary thought. “There’s a lot to this ‘father’ stuff,” I said.

“Isn’t there just,” the Lord nodded.

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