

Sermon 16 February 2020

Choosing Life

Readings: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

FSHS

Today's Old Testament & Gospel readings focus on 'teaching' - what it means to be a faithful member of God's people. I will be saying something about both readings. The gospel reading I found difficult to preach about for personal reasons which I hope you will see when I come to talk about that.

Whenever we read the Bible, there is always a dialogue going on between us and God, as we try to work out the character of God and what God requires of us as a people, and as individuals. Sometimes the results of that dialogue calls for change in us. Other times we feel affirmed by the dialogue, but we are always aware that we are dealing with a living document that never ceases to speak to us.

In our Old Testament lesson today, we hear an invitation from God to the people of Israel, to 'choose life!' It's still a message we need to hear today". Choose life, when you wake up in the morning and feel like going back to bed, "Choose life!" when you are feeling so depressed that you want to give up on life. "Choose life" when nothing seems to be going your way. Choose life!

That is definitely a message we need to hear, in a time when the youth suicide rate is increasing in New Zealand, when so many people are feeling the effects of isolation or alienation in an increasingly complex and busy world. Mental health has become one of the issues of our time.

When I was in the Navy Chaplaincy, I trained to do courses on Suicide Prevention. And I, and other chaplains taught Suicide Prevention to all the different levels of Navy personnel – but especially to the New Entrant level, the new trainees and young officers. What surprised me about the statistics in New Zealand is that one in four young people between 15 and 24 had done what we call 'suicide ideation', i.e. one quarter of 15 – 24-year-olds in New Zealand, had at least 'visited' or entertained the idea of taking their own lives.

I couldn't believe the statistic was that high in a country that has so much to offer young people. I remembered back to my own time as a youth, and I couldn't remember any of my own friends ever taking their own lives. I think we were more concerned with survival than giving up on life. Most of us came from large families and we didn't have time to think about taking our own lives. Running away was more of an option – at least that way you could create the kind of life you wanted. But more

recently, young people seem to implode on themselves and internalise their unhappiness.

People like Mike King and John Kirwan are still trying to discover what it is, or what combination of factors, make young people choose death over life. Some factors like 'relationship break ups', 'lack of family support', 'mental un-health' and a whole raft of other factors are involved in suicide.

In my day, and perhaps in yours, when a girl or boy broke up with you, you just thought, "Well, he/she's out of my league anyway" or "It just wasn't meant to be!" Or "I was out of his/her league anyway". And you just moved on ...

As a young person I was a real Presbyterian. I couldn't afford to have a girlfriend - unless she was prepared to go fishing, visit the museum, or go for walks, which were all for free!

Those of us who are now way beyond our youth, need to be mindful of the difficulties our young folk may be going through. Many of them don't see things in the way we used to see them. Because of their exposure to the internet, and social media, life for them, seems much more complicated and their expectations much higher.

Choose life! It is an invitation to `embrace life. To embrace freedom. To live life to the full even if it means fishing, going to the museum and taking long walks. Choose Life. A positive message that we all need to hear.

In contrast to that positive message, anyone reading our gospel lesson this morning (Mathew 5:21–37) might find the passage deeply discouraging and impossible to follow. After reading it you might want to give up on the Christian faith altogether.

In summary it says:

If you've ever been angry at someone, if you've ever thought of anyone as an idiot. If you ever felt an attraction to someone of the opposite or the same sex. If you've been divorced or if you have equivocated over an important decision – you are (as Israel Folau puts it), "going to hell"! You might feel condemned by what Jesus said in today's gospel reading which forms part of his famous Sermon on the Mount.

I felt discouraged when I read this passage from Mathew 5: 21– 37. Ive been angry at people lots of times in my lifetime. I've still got people whom I consider to be idiots. I've felt attracted to women. Ive been divorced - but not because I was attracted to another woman. And I've equivocated many times where my 'yes' became a definite 'maybe'.

I don't think there's a person alive who has not felt or done the same things that I have just described of myself.

I couldn't believe that the same Jesus who saved a prostitute from stoning could set the bar so high. I couldn't believe that the same Jesus who told the story of the Prodigal son, would make it nearly impossible for me, or anyone else, to be one of his followers, even though he said, "Your righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees".

And I was right. You see, it doesn't take a genius to realize that Jesus often used hyperbole, or exaggeration, to get his point across. Some examples of hyperbole that we use every day are: "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!" "I travelled a million miles to get here". "My wife will kill me when she finds out I broke her favourite vase!" "This bag weighs a ton!"

All these statements are impossible exaggerations, but we use them every day to emphasise a point we want to make.

Jesus used hyperbole in his sermon on the mount. And if we were to take his words literally, the Christian church would be full of people running around with one eye, one hand, with an unhealthy fear of hellfire.

Jesus was using hyperbole to say that our intentions can be just as destructive as our deeds. Hatred can turn into murder, if not checked. Labelling someone as an 'idiot' can be the start of demonising someone and dehumanising them. Unchecked lust can lead to objectifying and treating others as objects. Lust unchecked can ruin a good relationship. In speaking about divorce, Jesus was saying: women have got as much right as men to initiate divorce. (Which was not the case in 1st Century Israel where the divorce laws were weighted in favour of men). Dishonesty and betrayal can creep in, when we equivocate in the oaths and promises we make to other people.

Another way of saying all of that is: The same small fire that warms the house, can also burn it down. Our natural emotions can get the better of us, if left unacknowledged and unchecked. We need to take responsibility for our thoughts and for the deeds that flow from our thoughts. Just as hate is a choice we make. Love is also a choice we make.

And if we were to transpose the Old Testament lesson over our Gospel lesson. We could say that Jesus was saying: You are choosing life when you realise your own weaknesses. You are choosing life when you realise that no one (including yourself) is perfect. You are choosing life when you realise that you and everyone else, lives under the mercy and grace of God.

When you can see yourself in the mirror of a gracious Gospel, you will see what Jesus taught, as "Good News!" "Great News!" for ordinary people like us.

More importantly, you will see the God who loves you and accepts you as you are. You will see the God who wants you to choose life over death!

FSHS Amen