

Choose life

Our gospel reading, today is from Luke Chapter 14, and it is quite confronting: We heard that Jesus said:

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26-27)

And *“In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”* (Luke 14:33)

It’s extremely confronting. And it’s challenging to us. Most people are happy when Jesus challenged the pharisees or the temple authorities... or even when he challenged the very wealthy... but when he challenges us, his disciples, we’re not so happy.

I think it’s a human reaction. We’re happy when other people are being judged, but not so happy when we are.

This morning’s Old Testament reading is from chapter 30 of the book of Deuteronomy, in which we hear part of Moses’ last sermon to the Israelites. Moses had led them for 40 years in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt. There they were, getting ready to enter the land flowing with milk and honey – the land that God had promised them.

But Moses wasn’t going to be going with them. Moses had things to say to his people as he was leaving them in hands of his successor, Joshua. Moses’ last sermon contained inspiration – and challenge – for God’s chosen people. And also inspiration and challenge to us as God’s chosen people today.

We picked up Moses’ sermon at verse 15 when he says *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.”* (30:15)

God offers people life and prosperity. Jesus says in John’s gospel (Jn 10:10b) *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* We can choose to have life - both eternal life and the fullness of life here and now. And Moses explains how that can happen: *“For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”* (30:16)

So, if we are going to have a prosperous life (and that’s not necessarily financially prosperous – rather it is spiritually fulfilled), we need to love God and follow his ways. We need to submit to Jesus in order to live a blessed life.

Of course, we can all think of people who do seem to have been blessed but who don’t care at all about God. And that can be a hard thing to witness, because it doesn’t seem fair. But as Jesus says, *“[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”* (Matt 5:45).

Sure enough, many people have an abundance of money, power, fame, things like that but may well be empty when it comes to the more important things like peace, joy, hope,

contentment and love. If we want life and prosperity – if we want the life and prosperity that Jesus offers through his grace - then we need to respond to that grace by loving God and following his ways.

But if we don't love God and follow his ways, then there are consequences... and Moses goes on to spell them out: *"But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."* (30:17-18)

If we choose to be disobedient to God, if we choose to live our lives our own way, then we are on the path to death and destruction.

Moses talks about bowing down to other gods which might not seem relevant to 21st century life, but really, if we're putting things before God, then we're actually making those things into other gods and bowing down to them. If we're not directing our lives according to the wisdom of the one, true God then we are bowing down to the wisdom of some other 'god'.

We might not think that's what we're doing, but we are. There is no middle way. If we're not following God, then we're following something else. And the other gods of the 21st century aren't generally stone idols that we bow down to, but they're more likely, wealth, power, security, family, even perhaps church, and so on.

As we think about these verses, the question we need to ponder is are we allowing something else in our life to take the place of God? Are we following any other teaching, philosophy or idea? Because if we are, then we are following and bowing down to other gods, as sure as if we were kneeling before a stone statue. And if we continue that way we are doomed.

And that's true for everyone, until they come to know Jesus.

The apostle Paul writes that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23) and he goes on to say that *"the wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). But, immediately after that he declares that *"the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

There's a choice to be made. Moses sets that choice out in the next couple of verses:

"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (30:19-20)

At the time Moses set this choice out to the Israelites, they were about to enter the promised land: There was no immediate consequence to whatever they choice, because they were going to be shortly crossing the river into Canaan.

So, no immediate consequence, but certainly a lasting one. An everlasting one. But Moses wanted them to respond today – “*I set before you today*” – he said.

Effectively he said “Make your choice now so you will be ready”: make your choice so that you will enter the promised land living your lives as God wants you to live. It’s a serious choice.

And all people today need to make that serious choice too.

But it’s not a choice we can make and then forget about. Moses said in 30:20 that we need to “hold fast to him [God].” This means the choice we make isn’t just in the moment; but it’s ongoing... Jesus said in John’s gospel (Jn 8:31), “*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.*” This isn’t just a choice we simply need to make at the time we turn to Jesus, but after as well. Remember, Moses was speaking here to the Israelites, those who were already God’s people, who had already been saved from slavery in Egypt, who had already received God’s commandments.

We need to understand that that is true for us as followers of Jesus too. We need to remember where we came from. Not from slavery in Egypt, but from living our lives our own way rather than God’s way.

And we need to remember that our own way is still there, and we will often be tempted to return to the that way. Moses warns his listeners – and us today – “*if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.*”

Again, as Jesus said “*The wages of sin is death.*” (Romans 6:23))

But in Peter’s second letter (2Peter 3:9), he says that God wishes that none would perish but for all to come to repentance. Unfortunately, although God wants everyone to come to him, some won’t – and I think that’s our experience too. God wants everyone to choose life and prosperity, but sadly many will choose a life that ends in death and destruction instead.

At one level, we have to wonder why anyone would do that? Obviously if you just posed the choice to someone and said, ‘pick which one you want’ no one in their right mind is going to choose death and destruction. But we know they do.

Jesus said (Matt 7:13-14), “*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*”

While there’s a consequence of choosing God’s way, there is also an immediate cost to it. Because choosing God’s way means rejecting the world’s way.

God promises the fullness of life but that comes at a cost, and that’s what Jesus is talking about in today’s gospel reading. “*whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14:27). That means we are going to have to make sacrifices. We are going to have to put Jesus’ will ahead of our own. It also means we are going to need to change. In following Jesus, we are making a commitment to change our ways – to act and

even think the way that God wants us to act and think. That means we need to be loving and forgiving. Loving of God; and loving of our neighbours. And forgiving each other just as God forgives us.

And it means being willing to be mistreated for doing the right thing and not getting even with people when they do us wrong. People will choose the broad road over the narrow road because they are stubborn, selfish and prideful - they don't think they need to change, they don't want to change and so they're not going to change.

In the face of the choice in front of us, Moses – and Jesus – urges us to choose the right way. Choose the narrow path. Choose God's way. Or as Moses puts it so concisely, choose life.

And if we choose life, then, sad as it is, we're going to be divided from those who don't. We're going to be separated from, potentially, father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters.

Jesus phrases it as “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother” and so on. We can't claim to be followers of Jesus, and also put our mothers and fathers in front of Jesus. Or our spouses or children or whoever.

It's a tough thing. A really tough thing. But always, there's going to be a divide between those who choose God's way, and those who choose their own.

And Jesus last point is similarly tough, when he says: “... *those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples*” (Lk 14:33). I don't think he's talking about 'give up' as in 'give away', but more 'give them up to God'. To say to God, take what I have, whatever I have, no matter how much or how little, and use it.

We have a choice. We can choose to hold on to everything we have and use it how we think is best, or we can offer it all to God, and use it all the way God wants us to use it.

I think we can all get a bit too comfortable in our lives and in our faith. We can get used to the image of Jesus as a wise teacher, a healer, and even as a forgiver of sins. We can go through the motions of worship, and living our lives as nice people – nice Christians.

And we can forget that Jesus came to disturb the ways of the world, and to challenge people – not just pharisees and teachers of the law, but all people. To challenge them to turn away from the ways of the world and to turn to him in faith. To put their trust and their hope and their future not in wealth or power or family, but in him.

Jesus came to live for us. And die for us. And rise again for us. And open the way to everlasting life for us.

But it's always our choice whether to respond or not.

In the words of Moses: “*This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live*” (30:19)

It's always our choice.

And I pray that we all choose life.

Amen