

Choose life

16 2 14

Almighty God,
who alone can bring order
to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity;
give your people grace
so to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, among the many changes of this world,
our hearts may surely there be fixed
where true joys are to be found.

Our text today may be found in Deuteronomy chapter 30 and verse 19:

‘Choose life . . .’

Have you ever seen Danny Boyle’s film ‘Trainspotting’ ? Starring a young Ewan McGregor and set in Scotland in Edinburgh, ‘Trainspotting’ is about young people doing drugs and getting into crime. It’s both serious and funny, surreal and realistic – and it has a sort of happy ending. I think I saw it nearly twenty years ago but I can still remember the telling phrase at the beginning of the film – **‘Choose life’** which is our text today.

For me, one of the acid tests of any religious belief is whether or not what we are being asked to believe is life-enhancing. Our faith should make us whole,

complete, the people that God is calling us to be. The acid test by which to judge any set of religious belief are the words of Jesus we find in John's gospel where he tells us 'I came that they might have life and have it abundantly' (10 v10). And that, my friends, surely must be the point of belief in a loving God: that he wants us to be fully what it is to be human. So our faith should open us up to the joy of being alive and conscious, awake and embodied.

And so we move to today's gospel, another passage from Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount. I am reminded of a passage later in his gospel in which a rich young man, comes to Jesus to ask him what he needs to do to have eternal life. Jesus' response is simple – keep the commandments (19 v16–30). And today we have one take on what it might mean to do so.

Last week, we heard how Jesus told his disciples that their righteousness should exceed that of even the Pharisees who had a reputation for trying to be good in the sight of God. Today, Jesus is giving us examples of how this might be so. There are ten commandments. Here, Jesus focuses on just three: the sixth, the seventh and the ninth – murder, adultery and truth-telling. That's not to say the others are not important, essential as principles to inform the good life, it's just that here he is demonstrating a method of interpreting what is written.

The sixth commandment is you shall not kill. Jesus takes unlawful killing a step further, encouraging us not to be angry, not to lose our temper, not to get cross. Instead, he points to reconciliation as the norm for our relationships. I must smile here, knowing that though I'm actually unlikely ever actually to kill anyone, I

realise that I can lose my temper big time – a weakness I fear of my character type and the spirit with which I burn. That said, the challenge to us as Christians is take the injunction not to murder a step further and to try not to get angry but to be loving, caring and compassionate. That, my friends, is a real challenge – not least for me !

The seventh commandment is not to commit adultery. We live in an age of sexual liberation in which, perhaps, in his private life Francois Hollande is a model for such enlightened behaviour. But again, Jesus takes the injunction not to have sexual relations with the husband and wife of another person or with anyone else if we are married to another level. Here Jesus is warning us that even the thought of the act with someone inappropriate is wrong.

Lastly, the ninth commandment is about truth-telling, not bearing false witness. To be true, to tell the truth, not to lie, is a something that we would all readily subscribe to though curiously enough, the mark of a child growing up is his or her learning to lie ! That said, Jesus again takes the teaching a step further by extending it to taking an oath. Swearing an oath should not be necessary – a simple yes or no should be sufficient if what we say is the truth. Anymore is to overegg the pudding.

And before I finish one last point, another challenging image Jesus uses in verse 29: **‘If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.’** Now that is fairly graphic, fairly shocking, and there is an important lesson

to be learnt here about how to interpret scripture. To those who are literally minded, it is pretty clear but I believe Jesus is using an image to encapsulate a principle and to challenge us to think what it can mean in practice. His challenge to us is to rid ourselves of what might prevent us living the good life, to get rid of any obstacles stopping us being who we really could be.

So let me end by returning to our text – '**Choose life**'. If we are to do so, then by trying to keep the commandments, the spirit that underpins the letter of the law, will render us fit and proper persons to be called Christians.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

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G: Sermons 29 : Choose life

