



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Twelfth Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Deuteronomy 30.15-20](#), [Philemon 1-21](#), [Luke 14.25-33](#)

4 September 2022

As the cost-of-living rises, many people are having to make difficult choices.

Sustaining their current lifestyle will simply not be possible as we move into winter – many families will struggle to meet the mortgage and heat the home and provide quality healthy food. Many of us are economizing and planning to heat fewer rooms or for shorter periods or do without certain treats and non-essentials. Churches are being asked to consider whether they could offer a community ‘warm hub’ so that local residents could find a place of warmth.

As we enter an economic downturn, we recognise that difficult choices will have to be made and there is a cost to everything. In the business world there are many models that organisations use to make tough choices – things like profitability ratios or cost-benefit analysis. But how do we make difficult choices in our everyday life in a way that is informed by and consistent with our theology, biblical principles and our understanding of God’s will for us?

Our Bible passages today all talk about making choices and calculating the cost.

From the beginning, God chose to give us free will. If we were to think of God as having a leadership style it would be an invitational and collaborative one. God has chosen not to force or coerce people into doing things his way. He reveals principles and values and gives us examples of situations where things worked out well and examples of situations where they didn’t and he invites us to extrapolate and interpret and apply the insights and learnings we discover to our everyday life.

Common sense tells us that some things are better for us than others. For example while sweets are very tasty and delicious and make a lovely treat we know that the consequences of eating too many too often are a very painful toothache.

God invites us to learn practical wisdom by considering options and choices before us, thinking about the consequences and making an informed decision about how we will respond and move forward in a given situation. This is commonly called future pacing. Imagining what it would be like if you made different choices and then working out which choice is the best fit and most closely delivers what you want it to.

In Deuteronomy, Moses demonstrates this kind of thinking in action. Towards the end of the book, after outlining all the various commandments, laws and rules that God has given to his people, Moses describes the consequences of obedience and disobedience and right at the end of that just before he hands over his ministry to Joshua his successor, Moses summarises the whole of the Torah by summarizing and simplifying what has gone before.

Deut 30:19 ‘I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. 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.’

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel. Jesus picks up this same theme of choosing how we will live. Jesus is honest and doesn't try and mis-sell faith. He talks about the importance of putting God first – that our love for God must be so much stronger than our love for those we are closest to and even than our love for ourselves. He talks about true faith meaning we have to be willing to set aside our agendas and be willing to sacrifice ourselves in order to be faithful to God and our calling and vocation as Christians. Jesus talks about the need to consider what that will cost us.

When you are preaching to a large crowd of people, especially people you don't know, there is a real temptation to want to get them on side. To want them to think well of you. To want to offer comfort, reassurance, hope, inspiration. To send them out on a high, buzzing and energized.

In our world we are so used to listening to spin. People twist facts in various different ways to suit their purposes. We've all heard the adage about statistics – you can manipulate them to make them show whatever you want. I'm currently studying a People Management course and in the middle of an assignment about evidence based practice and part of that task is to review, analyse and interpret a set of data and present a minimum of three findings with recommendations based on those findings. In the assignment briefing seminar they said – there are no right or wrong answers. But that is wrong – there are ethical and unethical ways of presenting information.

Jesus is very different. He tells it as it is. He doesn't just present the positives but he talks about the difficulties.

It is easy for us to think that because God is love and loves us beyond anything we can ever imagine that being a Christian means that we should be happy and fulfilled and our needs should be met and we should get the best opportunities and enjoy a wonderful life.

But to choose life often means following a difficult path. When facing cancer, patients are frequently asked whether they want to receive treatment or not. The treatment offers hope but not certainty of being cured and can be painful and distressing and difficult to endure. When we choose to follow Jesus, we know the final outcome – all will be well and all manner of things shall be well. Our ultimate destiny is safe, our life is hidden in Christ and we have been given the kingdom of God. But the journey to fully receiving that is a long, windy and difficult one. Following Jesus means laying down our life for the sake of others.

In Paul's letter to Philemon we see three examples of the cost of discipleship. The reality of what following Jesus can look like. Paul is in prison because of his faith, Onesimus is considering how he should respond to the fact that in fleeing from slavery to gain freedom he broke the law and Philemon is being asked to ignore the law and demand the death of a run away slave but instead to welcome Onesimus back into his home as a beloved brother. All 3 are facing challenging choices and decisions about what it means for them to live out their faith.

Each and every day we face choices and have to make decisions. Jesus urges us to take those choices and decisions seriously. To consider and weigh the consequences and implications. To ensure we are prepared and have the necessary strength and resources to carry through what we decide. But he also offers us insight into how we can bear to make those tough choices of sacrificing ourselves for the sake of God and for the sake of others.

The first key is remembering the Ignatian insight of consolation and desolation. In most choices and decisions that we make some options lead to life and draw us closer to God and closer to becoming the person God created us to be. Other decisions lead to desolation, taking us further away from God and from God's ways and the person God invites us to become. Jesus encourage us as Moses did to choose life.

The second key is remembering what choosing life looks like. Remembering that we are known and loved by God in Christ with a love that is greater than we can ever imagine or comprehend. Every choice we make that brings us closer to God helps us experience that little bit more of God's love and helps enlarge our heart and deepen our love. As we focus on love it becomes easier to make loving choices and to sacrifice our wants and needs in order to act in love towards others. And as we remember that we are God's children precious in his sight and loved with an everlasting love, we can remember too all the blessings that God offers us and all the promises he has made to us.

Taking that longer, deeper, wider perspective helps us to endure temporary difficulties, set backs and struggles and to endure the cost of the sacrifices we might be asked to make. Knowing that God offers us eternal life and his blessing, peace, wholeness and very presence with us gives us the strength and courage to choose life.

The Revd Nicky Fenton, Bishop's Chaplain and Residentiary Canon.