

‘Choose Life’. (Third Sunday before Lent, Feb 12<sup>th</sup> 2017)  
Main passage: Deuteronomy 30:15-end,  
Also Matthew 5:21-37.

“Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Forces: You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months...The eyes of the world are upon you. I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory. Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.”

*Words from Dwight D. Eisenhower, a message sent to the Allied Forces on the Eve of the D-Day Landings in Normandy France, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944.*

Coach Bill Belichick saw his New England Patriots defeat the Atlanta Falcons. Deemed one of the greatest comebacks in Superbowl history. The coach – with his team 21 – 3 down at the midway point, after the second quarter, declared to his team

– “21 points is not enough for the Falcons to beat the Patriots!”

These messages came before a huge moment – Moses, in our OT passage, is 120 years old, yet his belly is still full of fire. He stands before the people of Israel gathered on the plain of Moab. Nearly all of them are 40 and under – they prepare to enter the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob centuries before. Moses reminds them of their history in the opening chapters, then the law and expectations of being a people with whom God has made a covenant. The covenant is renewed between the

people and God and we come to the closing words... choose life, choose God.

I don't know how you get on with IKEA furniture or any flatpack. It looks good in the shop or online. *Then*, you get it home, unpack it and *then* well, the plans don't seem to make sense, or why are there all these extra bits and in fact you realise you'd nailed the back panel on, and you now have to take it off again! Not very straightforward sometimes...

Here Moses and the challenge he gives to believers is very straightforward. If you broke down these verses: you could say –

- Choose!
- Love God and enjoy his blessings.
- Turn from God and experience curses.
- Choose.
- Choose life, life for you and your descendants, choose life by loving God, and being able to live in the land. It is simple.

### **It is Clear**

As the people of God standing there, and the people of God sitting here. As they were people who were preparing to go into a new land, to live and work and have children, to get married, to grow old... as the part of the people of God here, preparing to go into a new week, into a future, where we live, work, get married, have children, grow old...

we choose to obey God's law or not.

We can worship the Lord – and obey his commandments and laws for life - or we can worship something or someone else. What is clear is that we cannot worship the Lord God and something else. We cannot do pick and mix with God. To worship something else, is to turn away in your heart. “You shall have no other gods before me, ” declares our first Commandment. It puts God right at the centre, the gravity around which our live moves.

But when we consider the history of Israel from exodus to exile, we see how they worshipped Yahweh and yet many also wanted to be flexible. They worshipped and yet felt there was also elements of truth in the Baals and other gods and if they are valued those elements then why not worship those gods as well as the God of Israel. So not *‘the truth’* found in the Lord God but rather *truths* in many places. This is syncretism – blending and mixing - and probably blending or embracing the ones which were popular or attractive. And isn’t that the challenge facing churches and Christians? Modernity argued that there was one meta narrative - one truth. Yet postmodernism – which has been influencing society for many years - argues that there is no one overarching truth, but *truths*. ‘What is true for you, is fine and you can believe it as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.’ What is popular can become truth.

What Moses demands of the thousands in front of him is faith. Religion may be flexible. But faith calls us to say AMEN to the first commandment – ‘you shall have no other gods before me’ – he is to be our gravity. Biblical faith means taking seriously and living out what the Lord God commands. Jesus expressed it in another way - as Moses speaks to the elect, so Jesus does when he says his words “I am the Way, the Truth, the Life” (John

14:v6) he did not say I am 'A way, a truth, a life'. God is not accommodating to pick and mix. We hear that weight in our gospel (Matthew 5) – 'you have heard it said, but I say to you...'

So believers are asked – who is at the centre, who is your everything, who is your life?

### **It is absolute**

Second is – this is absolute. The words used – life, and good, death and evil. Life death, blessings, curses. There is no third way. You choose one or the other based on how you respond to the Creator God. You could say, to be honest, there is no choice when confronted with this either / or. It is like you are on a sinking ship and you can go down with the ship, or you can jump into that lifeboat that has a space left in it. There really is no choice. Paul expresses it, in a different yet absolute way:

*for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God, is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:v23)*

It is either / or. We live our lives as we desire and what we earn the wages, is death. Or there is the possibility of eternal life, not achieved through our good works, not by going to church, but Paul is clear, eternal life through the gift of God which is Christ Jesus our Lord. An offer of grace. And it isn't Paul who is absolute – in John 3:v16 we hear: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Despite the great love of God, Jesus says there is choice and a clear choice, no third way – belief in Jesus Christ means eternal life, to fail to believe means to perish.

But we are asked to *choose life*. It is easy to think of *life* being personal, what I gain. Or to think it is only about eternal life – which we often think of beginning after we die but in fact Jesus teaches it begins when we believe and trust in him. (John 17:v3). But Deuteronomy 30 has the vision of an individual but also a community – as you choose life, then you gain life, and blessing. As individuals and the community choose life, individually and as a community receive life. The idea of blessing – ‘Berakah’ (in Hebrew) – is, in the Old Testament (OT), the ability for life to expand and flourish in all ways. The OT does not divide between spiritual and material blessings. In Deuteronomy, as we read the chapters, blessing means security, prosperity, fertility, health., God’s favour. That is what comes to the community by faith – this is the life Moses urges them to choose.

The teachings of Jesus – in Sermon on the Mount, part of which we heard, and of course, elsewhere, bring life to a Christian community – Jesus points to this. Jesus commands are about holiness, but also they bring life.

In John 7 v37-39) Jesus speaks of streams of living water flowing from within in. By this he means the Spirit that comes to live within each believer. Jesus words are deliberately connected to Ezekiel 47 where we read of the river of living water flowing from the temple and comes into the dead sea and life comes into dead places. The Spirit to bring life, where there was and is death.

Consider the first two statements – about murder and adultery in Matthew 5. Jesus says, anyone continually angry, holding things against someone, is just as guilty, someone who is insulting or treats a believer with contempt. Instead Jesus calls

for reconciliation. I have met people who do not forgive – the family spilt where siblings don't forgive one other. A person in church who cannot forgive a hurt done to them years before. A congregation which will hold against a pastor his mistakes. We can hold things from the past – a true story from UK was about one village, in the East of England, that did not forgive a neighbouring village, because, when they were not warned when the Vikings came! That is a long time to hold a grudge!

But a church, a church family, can be full of people who don't forgive, people who insult, or gossip, hold grudges. All those things sounds like a church can be a place of death to me.

Or a church community can be a place of blessing for someone to come to. A place where forgiveness is freely offered – when hurts are caused; a place where people are not insulted but built up...

Then Jesus talks about adultery and challenges says if anyone lusts, they commit the same sin. Consider the marriages where a spouse may feel unloved, unsure, insecure because they know what their husband watches online, or a spouse who knows whenever a handsome man comes into that restaurant, they will be regularly looking over. Jesus is not saying you cannot recognise the beauty of a woman or the handsome of a man, but there is line quickly crossed. Many of us know when it moves from admiring to desiring.

But instead with secure marriages, men & women knowing they are loved, valued, the apple of the eye each others eye. Not a dead marriage. Life. So we can see Jesus words as only about

holiness. But we notice how it means life for couples, rather pain, distance, decay.

So, to choose God means choosing life, not just personal salvation eternal life – which is why Christ came, and what we celebrate in Communion- but by choosing God, as revealed by Christ, we experience life in different ways – I’ve only picked up on two very quick examples as indicated at the start of the gospel, there are many other examples further in the Sermon of the Mount and elsewhere in Jesus teaching.

So it is **clear** – God to be your centre, to be your gravity, it **absolute** – choosing God through Christ means life, to fail to do so, means decay, death. Finally **passionate**.

### **It is Passionate**

Coming back to the coach of the New England Patriots. How do you think he told his team –

“21 points is not enough to beat the Patriots.” ?

You read Moses and his words burn with fire. Moses is passionate for them to choose. Again you break it down – Choose, love God, enjoy blessings, turn from God, means curses, choose, love God, for that “means life to you.” There is a Hollywood film just out called ‘Silence’. And in it the story focuses upon Jesuit missionaries. As I studied Mission History in my MA, I had such an awesome respect for the Jesuits. This Roman Catholic Missionary Order - many died as they travelled, many died as they worked in the middle of nowhere, and many were martyred because they chose Christ. They had passion for

people to choose life. I read of Persecuted Christians who despite the threats today to share their faith – they will do so. They don't do it to gain eternal life. They have eternal life already – they have the great gift of God of Christ. But they have passion that others too would choose Christ. Moses is passionate. We can be praying for that passion in our bellies that we will long for others to choose life – people who, have turned away, those who have never chosen ever.

Dylan Thomas the poet wrote:

“Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”  
(Dylan Thomas, Welsh Poet 1914-53, from his poem ‘Do not gentle into that good night’)

We will not quietly , gently accept those who go into the night, but we will be passionate longing them to choose life. We long for God to place such a fire in our bellies that we are passionate that people choose life, so it shapes our prayers, it shapes how we engage with people. This is both for people to embrace eternal life, but also to embrace the life that Jesus points us to in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

But there is a second voice of passion in Deuteronomy. He is the one that Moses speaks for – God – the passionate one who longs that we would choose life. A God who so longed for us to choose, he sent his only Son. The God, who in love, longs for us, who have never opened that door to him, to choose life. For those who have turned away to know – as the people are reminded in Deuteronomy – that there is always a way back to God. For each of us who become a Peter there is a restoration

also possible. And God longs for us, who have allowed lust, anger, unforgiveness, greed, bitterness to get a hold, that life can come into those dark places.

Years after Moses, the man who succeeded him, very old also stood before the people of Israel and declared:

<sup>14</sup> 'Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. <sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.' (Joshua 24:v14-15)

Whom shall you serve?

Closing Prayer:

Lord, I choose life.

I choose you.

Help me to love you, obey you and hold fast to you.

Amen.