

Sermon for Third Sunday before Lent 12th February 2017
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Freedom to choose. Power to choose. This has been a regular rallying cry through my life. As a small child the choices I remember most clearly were between Bourbon biscuits or custard creams and between BBC 1 and BBC 2 on the television – my mother taking a dim view of ITV. A world that though only 50 years ago might be 500 when compared to the choices in food and entertainment and everything else we are offered today.

As I grew older the CHOICE factor became politically vital. Freedom to choose our schools, our doctors and hospitals. This emphasis on freedom of choice suggests that life should be full of choices and that we have the right to continually exercise that freedom. Not much about which choices might be better for us than others. Our readings today are at first glance or hearing about choices. In fact they are about one choice which holds within it every other choice.

In the reading from Deuteronomy we hear Moses speaking to his gathered people. Moses is nearing the end of his life, we are told in the next chapter that he is 120 years old. His dramatic life story from a baby in the bulrushes, meeting God in the burning bush and on Sinai, the Passover and the subsequent 40 years in the wilderness have brought him to this time and place. He is standing in Moab in sight of the Promised Land.

What Moses is saying to the Children of Israel is a restatement of God's promise or covenant. The promise that he will be their God and they will be his people by the sign and fulfilment of the Law. It is also though an old man's reflection and testimony to a lifetime in God's hands.

For Moses both as a leader and as a man God's promise is simple and trustworthy: Choose life that you and your descendants may live. What does this choice involve? It means: Loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, obeying his laws and holding fast to him. The choice is between accepting the love of God and life and rejecting it and finding that having your own way leads not to freedom but to death.

The Gospel passage we heard this morning is a continuation of section of Matthew's Gospel we heard last week. They are all words from the Sermon on the Mount. The teaching is given to the crowds just after he has emerged from the temptation in the wilderness. Jesus has explained to his Jewish listeners that the Law God gave to Moses and he shared with them is fulfilled in the Good News of his message not rejected. The promise of God stands. The promise of God stands before them in Jesus.

But what is Jesus saying? What is he asking us to do when he talks about casting out our right eyes and cutting off our right hands if they lead us to sin?? What is all that about and how does it mesh with God's loving and trustworthy promise? It is about that word "Choose". We are not wind-up clockwork toys of the universe, we have a choice. And the language Matthew tells us Jesus used to talk about those choices is extreme language because it is an extreme choice.

Choose. Whether under Egyptian tyranny like the Children of Israel had been, under Roman occupation as those hearing Jesus were, or us, living in our own new anxiety a minute world, the choice has not changed.

Jesus challenges his Jewish hearers to stop paying lip-service to what they say they have chosen but to look at their relationships with God and with each other. Show me how this choice is at work in you! It would be possible to keep the commandments but have lying, hating, lusting and cheating hearts that destroy the life in us.

But the kingdom Jesus points to is not one filled with people lacking their right eyes and right hands but people who have made their choice to love God and to share that love with everyone else. And then? We do it! That is we don't keep negotiating that choice – we live it.

Sam Wells, the Vicar of St Martin's in the Fields writes very powerfully about choosing. He writes: *It's often said that life is about choices. But a life based on perpetual choice would be a nightmare. To avoid the tyranny of having to make perpetual choices, we develop habits. The point about habits is to develop good ones!*

As we approach Lent it is good to make a survey of our own habits and patterns. Are they good habits? Do they allow that choice we have made to Choose Life shine out? What in my day shows that choice? What in my relationships? What in the things I choose to do, to watch, to buy, to ignore? My prayer life. My reading of the Bible. Does my life reflect that one choice?

In these weeks before Lent we pray for the strength to examine the pattern of our lives and to live as those who have truly chosen Life in all its fullness, pressed down and running over. The true freedom of having made our choice.

Amen