

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Epiphany 6a*

*Choosing Life*

Our lives are filled with choices. And often it is hard to know what is the best choice.

Choices are difficult. It is much easier when faced with the choice at afternoon tea of an apple or a chocolate biscuit to go for the biscuit, particularly if one is tired!

Or to decide what is the more environmentally friendly option.

It is often easy to get distracted rather than make a difficult choice – like whether to preach on today's challenging gospel or not. It would be much easier to say look over there at something else!

'Choose life,' says God through Moses as the people of Israel stand at the edge of the promised land. Before them is set life and prosperity, death & adversity, blessings and curses. 'Choose life,' Moses urges.

The law was designed to enable people to choose life as God's gift and to walk in the ways of God. It was a guide as to how to live in a way that chooses life and responds to God's blessings and to be blessed, to flourish. The laws were not about being a goody two shoes and earning one's way into the kingdom, but about something deeper, that how we live with each other and with God matters.

That is also what Jesus is saying in the Gospel reading for today. What does it mean to choose life, to live in a life-giving way

rather than death-dealing. It is above all about loving God and our neighbour which is behind all of these individual sayings.

It is also important to realise that these commands aren't addressed to individuals alone but to the community as a whole.

Matthew is setting out Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the law for the current issues that faced his community. He is spelling out what it means to be salt and light of the world.

How we live with each other matters. Jesus is setting out a new way of life, in the light of unfolding reign of God coming in through Jesus.

These are four heavy topics to talk about: anger, lust, adultery and oaths. Each of these have been taken out of context and used against people. That is not what was intended by these sayings. The beginning and the end of these sayings is about God's love and how we love others. The last group of these sayings that we don't hear today is about loving your enemies.

So these sayings aren't here to be used as weapons against people in judgment, but are about something much deeper – how we live in love from the heart.

They are also full of hyperbole. Of course Jesus isn't saying literally cut off your hand, but getting people to sit up and take notice.

You shall not murder, but I say to you if you are angry... It is not about feeling angry but what one does with it. Anger that festers leads to violence. Anger itself is not wrong, but what you do with it matters.

If you sit on it and it becomes hatred then that's what leads to murder. He's basically saying don't write anyone off.

As Bill Loader says in his commentary on this passage: 'If we believe in God's generosity and goodness towards us we won't write ourselves off and we will not write others off'.

Be reconciled – sort out your differences and don't let them fester. God's intention is that we do no damage to each other.

Lust. Often this one has been interpreted as if a man looks at a woman and has a sexual response, that is adultery. Often ends up with the result that women are to blame – so cover up!

This is not what the text says: it is about responding to a *married* woman with the result of committing adultery.

Respect committed relationships. It is addressed to men, but equally applicable to a woman. Take responsibility for your sexuality, get your mind sorted out.

Don't treat someone as an object, but as a person.

In the law there is no command about divorce. This one has in particular been used against those who find that their relationships have failed.

In Deuteronomy they dealt with it by taking another wife. In Greek and Roman times when monogyny was valued divorce became more common and for really trivial reasons – didn't like the meals she cooked, or what she wore – so divorce.

And of course it was used as a way of having power over a woman. She had no say and could be left homeless and destitute.

Adultery in those days was also seen as an automatic end to marriage. This teaching is harsh and is often used against people. I think what Jesus is getting at here is that God's intention is that committed relationships in marriage are the ideal.

Yet the ideal isn't always what happens and there are many other things that can lead to a marriage ending, and it can be a more life giving choice to end it, if it is life-denying.

In each of these teachings Jesus constantly shifts the focus to the attitude behind the law and how we deal with the complexities of heart and mind. He is saying that the way we treat each other matters. God cares about how we relate to each other. How we live together in community matters.

The last one about not swearing oaths is really saying be truthful, have open and straight communication with each other. This is one way that we show respect for each other – so no weasel words!

The choices we make in life matter.

These choices are not always easy or simple, they are about how we live in ways that are loving or not with each other, how we are bearers of God's light.

As Martin Luther said: 'Through violence you may murder a murderer but you can't murder, murder. Through violence you may murder a liar but you can't establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.'

Perhaps one way is how we choose to respond to situations, whether we allow anger to lead to bitterness and then to hate or

whether we can find a way to respond with compassion. In the end only lives lived in the light of God's love can do this.

As Paul says we are God's field, God's building. We all bear the image of God's face, and this house can be a house where love can dwell and all may safely live. That is the hope that is worth proclaiming.

Choose life.

There is a poem that speaks of something of this truth by Marilyn Maciel:

i  
you  
us  
them  
those people  
wouldn't it be lovely  
if one could  
live  
in a constant state  
of we?  
some of the most  
commonplace  
words  
can be some of the biggest  
dividers  
they  
what if there was  
no they?

what if there  
was only  
us?  
if words could be seen  
as they floated out  
of our mouths  
would we feel no  
shame  
as they passed beyond  
our lips?  
if we were to string  
our words  
on a communal clothesline  
would we feel proud  
as our thoughts  
flapped in the  
breeze?<sup>2</sup>

*Lectios:*  
*Deuteronomy 30.15-20*  
*Psalm 119.1-8*  
*1 Corinthians 3.1-9*  
*Matthew 5.21-37*