

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Epiphany 6A

Sunday 12 February 2023

I say to you choose life

Choose Life.

We take life for granted until something happens to us or are shaken awake by what happens around us.

The earthquake in Turkey and Syria, is devastating for those communities and our hearts go out to them

The disaster also reminds us of the gift of life and all that we take for granted.

It has been difficult to see the harrowing pictures of people trying to dig with their bare hands to rescue those who are trapped and the survivors trying to find a way to live.

How do you choose life?

It depends on the situation you face.

Moses gives this last speech to the people of Israel as they are on the edge of a precipice – their life is about to change.

They have been journeying for 40 years and their destination, the promised land is in sight.

They are about to enter a new reality as a people as they become a nation.

Moses prepares them by reminding them that they have choices before them as a people – how they live will matter.

They can choose life and prosperity or death and adversity.

Moses has set out before them the laws that will help govern the way they live.

These are guidelines, ways of responding to the relationship God has made with them.

They are ways to respond to God's gift of love and mercy and the gift of the promised land. Now Moses is summarising what is at the heart of all these guidelines.

What is most important is to love God and walk in God's ways and how they relate well to each other.

They are reminded to be conscious of the choices they make and consider them well.

This was also important for the community who heard these words later. This book was brought together in the time when Israel was in Exile in Babylon and were about to come back to Israel.

They had endured the chaos of everything going wrong.

They had endured the agony and hardship of being away from their land, living in a foreign place after Israel had failed to walk in God's ways and its people and kings had been distracted by other things.

The reminder to choose life was a reminder about how they are to walk now, to be careful in the decisions they make.

This is also what Jesus is saying in the gospel reading today.

If we sift below the rhetoric and hyperbole of 'you have heard that it was said' and 'I say to you' and all the talk about cutting off hands Jesus is saying that how you live matters.

He is saying that how you live is a matter of the heart.

It is not about paying lip service to God's laws but integrating them into how we live with others and walk in God's ways.

Jesus is interpreting what the laws mean for the new community of the blessed that he is forming.

He is setting out what it might mean to live as God's people – to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

Our first response to this reading might be that we are all doomed – that it is too hard to live in the ways that Jesus is talking about.

It is helpful to remember that is addressed to a whole community not individuals – this is something we do together.

It is also helpful to remember that Jesus has been talking about the blessed community and has reminded his hearers that they are already salt and light of the world.

It is a reminder to be who they already are – in the ways that God has already blessed by God's love and mercy and grace.

Jesus is saying that these laws aren't a matter of the head, but of the heart.

It is not just the big stuff that matters but the little stuff.

When we trust in God's love and generosity towards us then we will not write ourselves off and we will not write others off.

To choose life is to move towards each other rather than away, it is to be conscious of the choices we make in all the small things of life as well as the big.

A journalist was travelling home on a packed train surrounded by other people glued to their phones. Suddenly a man spoke up.

Can I talk with you? he said to the three other people sitting with him. I really need to talk.

People hesitated but each of them nodded – yes they said – not sure of what was coming next.

The journalist and the others shared their names and what they did and that yes they would listen.

Then the story came out. He'd just said goodbye to his mother who was dying and was travelling back on the train to his family.

He talked about how he felt and what she had meant to him and all the ways she had cared for him and loved him and what it was like leaving her for the last time and travelling back to his home.

The others listened and they talked together quietly until they reached their destination.

At the end the man thanked the others for listening to him and what a difference it had made not to feel alone, to share what was happening to him.

The journalist reflected that you never know what someone is dealing with who is sitting on the train next to you.

She realised how meaningful it was to share in that conversation and feeling connected with this man and the other travellers which would have not happened if they had said no and had remained glued to their phone.

These three people attended to the man and a moment of grace, of connection happened. They moved towards each other and found themselves on holy ground.

It reminds me of what Laurence Freedman says when he talks about the greatest gift we can give someone is to attend to them, to listen to them intently, to be open.

Perhaps this is what is at the heart of what Jesus is saying.

He is wanting people to listen to him and to listen to each other and see each other as human beings worthy of respect, to attend to matters of the heart in love.

Enfold us Lord in your love,
Surround us with your peace,
Encircle us with your power.
Enable us to be what you would have us be;
Empower us to do what you would have us do
Through Christ our living Lord. Amen.

Edwina Gateley poem.

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