

# Choose Life ...

*... whatever it costs*

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*A sermon given on the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Luke 14:25-33; Deuteronomy 30:15-end*

Well I think it's clear from that gospel reading that Jesus is not exactly in crowd-pleasing mood - *"If you want to be my disciple, you have to hate your mother and father, your wife and children; take up the cross and follow me"* - to crucifixion and, just for good measure, give up all your possessions. Imagine Rishi Sunak or Liz Truss trying to win support with that kind of message - actually, it might be refreshingly honest, mightn't it? But Jesus's style seems designed to drive people away, not to bring them flocking. We're told at the beginning that there was a great crowd following him, so he seems to be wanting to sift them and get rid of those who are not serious.

So what do we think is going on here? Well, it may help to see it as Jesus telling people that they have to make a choice between life and death extremes.

There's a story from the Second World War of the Gestapo rounding up Jews in one of the cities that the Nazis had occupied and telling them that they could only leave home with 100lbs weight of luggage. And one family rushed around packing suitcases and agonising about which treasured possessions they could fit in, until eventually they had their cases stuffed full. And then when the police turned up and saw the family with their small children, the policeman says, "Well, what about them?" - pointing to the children - "They're included in the luggage allowance." And faced with a choice between the children or the jewellery, it was obvious which was more important - the possessions didn't matter. In a similar vein, there was a film made a few years back based on the true story of a man called Aron Ralston, who was a hiker who was trapped by a freak accident in a national park in Utah. And after five days with his arm trapped under a boulder, he decided to amputate his own arm in order to get free, because it was a choice between either his arm or death.

It seems to me that Jesus's warning that you can't follow him without 'letting go' of possessions and family needs to be understood in that kind of way. It's not that

possessions or family are unimportant or don't matter - it's that they have nothing to do with finding the way of true life. And sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that if we only value our family or our career or our house sufficiently, then these things can save us.

In the passage when Jesus says that you have to count the cost of discipleship and that no one builds a temple in Jerusalem without first of all making sure they can afford it, people would have been very aware that King Herod had started a very ambitious temple-rebuilding project that had run out of steam. And when Jesus says that no one wages war against the Roman Empire without first of all making sure they're stronger than the Romans, people would have been aware that there were resistance groups who thought that they could take on the might of Rome. Jesus is making the point that although following him is costly, in reality there is no realistic alternative. He's saying that serving God by building temples or fighting great empires isn't realistic - it won't help you to access God's grace any more than thinking that your possessions and your children together will weigh less than 100lbs. It's not possible. The only way to fulfilling life in God is to follow Jesus on the way of the cross.

So the passage presents us with a radical choice between life and death. The path to life may be difficult and costly, but it's way better than the alternative.

It's a little bit like the attitude of soldiers in the front line in one of those conflicts where the average lifespan is so short that death seems inevitable. In such circumstances, soldiers may accept that they are as good as dead and stop worrying about how to survive. And in the various accounts of people who have been in that situation, it seems there is a certain kind of freedom, even peace, that comes with letting go and accepting the inevitability of death. In more spiritual language, it's the idea of 'detachment', that we grow closer to God the more we are able to let go of earthly preoccupations, and vice versa. If our hearts are full of God, we don't love our families any the less, or value our treasured possessions any the less, but we are no longer defined by them. We have an existence and a value that doesn't depend on anyone else or anything else, because it's guaranteed by God. That's why monks are able to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. It demonstrates their freedom from ties of family and property and independence. And that's, in effect, what Jesus is offering here. It's radical, it's profound, but it's also really rather

beautiful. It's also deeply countercultural, because in our culture, we believe the three most important things are our independence, which we often confuse with freedom; our sexuality, which isn't quite the same thing as love; and our possessions, which we often confuse with security.

Jesus offers us the insight that the way of life lies in finding detachment from these things which we think define us and which we then enthrone as idols.

So let me spell it out again: you can be loved without having a family; you can be rich without having any possessions; and you can be free without being independent and self-sufficient.

And Jesus invites us to choose him instead of the false gods that can't deliver what they promise. And making that choice can at first feel like cutting off your arm. St Paul says, *"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."* It's also the language of baptism where going into the water, we're told we 'die to sin in order to be raised with Christ to newness of life'. Jesus invites us daily to make that choice. His Holy Spirit gives us the will to make that choice. So let's not make the mistake of imagining that no choice needs to be made.

The Old Testament reading set for today is the passage where Moses addresses the people of Israel and having summarised the law, he urges them to choose life. He says, *"Choose life, not death."* - choose life, whatever it takes, that you may love God and hold fast to him and discover the fullness of life that only He can give.

And that's the choice the Lord Jesus presents to us day by day, moment by moment. It's a choice to be made - choose life, whatever it costs.

## Reading Text

Luke 14:25-33

<sup>25</sup> Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup> 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. <sup>28</sup> For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? <sup>29</sup> Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, <sup>30</sup> saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." <sup>31</sup> Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup> If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. <sup>33</sup> So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Deuteronomy 30:15-end

<sup>15</sup> See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God\* that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.