

Choose Life

Date: 21 November 2021, 25th Sunday after Trinity (Christ the King)

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Words for Life (Deuteronomy)

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:10-20; Romans 10:5-17; Mark 10:13-16

Life is often shades of grey, but sometimes you come to a black and white moment that demands a decision. And the choice you make will determine the course of your future. Next weekend is our 12th wedding anniversary. 12.5 years ago Claire and I decided to get married and 6 months later we publicly promised to love and to cherish, honour and protect each other, to the exclusion of all others. That choice has shaped our lives ever since. Prior to that day yes we were in a relationship, but there wasn't that commitment. Options were still open. Either of us could have walked away. For the relationship to be of lasting substance we had to decide yes or no. And in the business and complexities of life with family and work and illness and so on, every day still comes back to that simple choice, to continue to live out that promise.

We've been studying the book of Deuteronomy this year and we've come to our last sermon. The book is 3 sermons that Moses preaches to ancient Israel on the eve of her crossing the Jordan to enter into the land God had promised her. Through the book Moses has reminded Israel of her story as God's people, how God rescued her out of slavery from Egypt; how he revealed himself to her at Mt Sinai as the one true and living God; How he gave her his law, summarised in 10 commandments; how they were called to love the Lord God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength; how as God's people they were called to live according to his laws, bearing witness to the nations of God's goodness and justice; how God promised to bless them and warned them not turn away from him. There's a few more chapters in the book, but today we're finishing with Moses' final charge to Israel. This is a moment of decision. We heard it in verse 19.

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life.

The choice that Moses lays before Israel is one we all face. Some of you may be here for Beatrix's baptism and be wondering what this Christianity thing is all about. It is this choice: God offers us life in Jesus. To turn away from him is death. Will you and I choose life? This is a choice that none of us can escape. It's a choice which determines the course of our lives and one we return to each day. This morning as we consider Deuteronomy 30:10-20, we'll ask how these verses are fulfilled in Christ and what they mean for us today. We'll look at 2 points - (1) This is not beyond you and (2) Choose Life.

This is not beyond you 11-14

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. **12** It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” **13** Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” **14** No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Moses' point in these verses is very clear. It is not as if God has been hiding his expectations from Israel. Rather he has made the terms of his relationship with Israel very clear. He is their God. They are his people. And as his people he expects them to love and obey him. Israel doesn't need to go hunting to discover what God requires from them. Moses has set it plainly before them in this book.

Verse 14 says,

No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

This goes back to the centre of God's revelation and his command, back in chapter 6.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **5** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. **6** These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **7** Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Notice how obedience to God springs from a heart that loves God. Jesus says in John 14, “If you love me, keep my commands.”¹ God does not just want outward obedience, important though that is. He wants our hearts. Because of course if our hearts don't love God, then we'll stop obeying him when we can't see the benefits anymore.

The word is in your mouth.

We are forgetful people. Our hearts easily wander. And so Moses says, you need to have these commands constantly before you. Remind yourselves of them. Talk about them at home and on the road. When you go to bed, when you wake up. This is an invitation to read the Bible every day, to let it seep into our conversation so that it shapes our lives. And did you notice Moses says, teach this to your children. That's the promise we make as parents when we bring our kids to be baptised. To raise our kids to know God and his ways, and that means reading the Bible and praying with them each day. Working the things of God into the routines of your family life.

In Romans 10 St Paul interprets these verses of Deuteronomy in light of Jesus, and this helps us understand how they apply to us as Christians.

In Romans 10.4 he says,

Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

¹ John 14.15

That word translated as culmination is *telos*, which means end, or goal, or purpose. This verse gives a key interpretive principle for us on reading the Old Testament Law. It's similar to Jesus' words in Matthew, "I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them."²

Paul's big theme in Romans is righteousness. This covers both justice and right relationship. Here Paul is using it to mean being in right relationship with God. Through the letter he has said that we're put right with God, not through our own moral performance, but rather through trusting in Jesus' death for us. On the cross he takes the just punishment for sin that we deserve, so that all who trust in him receive his right relationship with God the Father. This is the righteousness by faith.

In Romans 10.6-9 Paul picks up our verses from Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) **7** "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). **8** But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: **9** If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

The first quote from Deuteronomy is "Do not say in your heart". This picks up Deuteronomy 9:4 where Moses warns Israel not to think "It's because of my righteousness that God is giving the land to me". For Israel, the land was God's gracious gift, not because of their obedience. Their obedience was in response to the gift. Paul's point here is that like Israel we might be tempted to say in our hearts, "It's because of my righteousness, my good deeds, that God will accept me or bless me or save me."

Paul continues quoting from Deuteronomy 30,

"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)

I think what Paul means here is that we might be tempted to think that to know God and we can somehow work our way up to God. This is the great temptation for us in 2 ways. One is that we can through our collective efforts bring heaven to earth. Second is that we can, of our own, reason our way to God. That is that God has to conform to what we think is "reasonable" or possible, as if we could comprehend the infinity of the Almighty Creator. These are simply 2 forms of pride - moral and intellectual. No, God himself has already come down and made himself known to us in the person of Christ. We need not ascend to heaven, because he has come down.

Paul goes on, verse 8

"Who will descend into the deep?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Here Paul adapts the horizontal metaphor from Deuteronomy, "Who will cross over the sea",

² Matthew 5.17

to a vertical metaphor, “Who will descend into the deep [or the abyss]?” He can do so because the sea is associated with the grave and the realm of the dead in Jewish thought. Now, I’m flying a bit of a kite here, but I think here Paul has in mind that fear of death and yearning for immortality we all have. This so often finds expression in the myths all cultures tell about trying to cross into the realm of the dead to bring people back. His Roman hearers may have thought of Orpheus descending into the underworld to rescue his wife Eurydice, only to have his efforts dashed at the last moment. Paul says, no, we need not try to wrest life from death, because Christ himself has risen from the dead.

Just as the word of God given through Moses was present and within reach for Israel, so now Paul repeats Moses' words with respect to Christ. Notice the repetition of mouth and heart.

But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: **9** If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Christ has done all that is needed to put us in the right with God and give us life eternal. He has fulfilled the law of Moses. He has come down to make God known to us. He has conquered death itself. Now all we need to do is to trust him, to receive his gift of righteousness by faith, to confess Jesus is Lord, to trust that God raised him from the dead.

Well done for wading through Paul’s dense argument with me. Let’s return to Deuteronomy 30:15-20 for point 2.

Choose Life 15-20

In verse 15 Moses puts before Israel their choice.

15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

What does it look like to choose life and prosperity?

16 For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

What is the alternative?

17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, **18** I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

For us the promise is not life in Canaan, but the promise of life in the new creation, the heavenly city, come to earth, where God will dwell with his people and he will wipe away every tear from every eye.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has secured this future for us. He is the gateway to life. He says to us, “I am the resurrection and the life. All who believe in me will live, even though they die. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” He is the bread of life. He

offers the water of life. He says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The question that Moses asked Israel is the same question Jesus asks you and me. Will you choose life? Put another way, will you put your trust in Jesus?

How? How can you do that? Paul tells us. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. This is what baptism is about. It's a sign of the life that Jesus gives us - the washing clean from sin, death to the old life turned away from God, and new birth by the power of the Holy Spirit, being joined to Christ and so becoming part of his body the church. And it's a moment of public confession, owning Christ as your Lord and committing to walk in his ways for the rest of your days. It's very clear that Beatrix brings nothing to table here. Baptism is in this sense a sign of God's grace, that it's all Jesus and his work. But just as Moses said "choose life so that you and your children may live," so Jesus' death is for us and for our children, and so we bring our kids to be baptised. And just like Moses told the Israelites to teach their children about the Lord and his ways, so when we bring our kids to be baptised we promise to teach our children about the Lord Jesus and his ways. Every baptism is an opportunity for us to renew our vows to be Christ's and Christ's alone.

The choice to receive Christ, determines the shape of the rest of your life. It means a commitment like Moses urged the Israelites, to love God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands. This is the way of life. How can we walk in this way? Moses tells us. First we are to love the Lord as our God. It begins in the heart, choosing to set our affections upon him and not those other things which compete for the throne of our heart. Second, we are to listen to his voice. The primary way God speaks to us is through the Bible. So take every opportunity you can to drink in God's word. Read your Bible each day. Join a Bible Study. Listen to God's word read and proclaimed at church. Listen not just to tickle your brain, but to hear God speaking! Listen to him even when he disagrees with you and with fashionable opinion. Listen, for his words are light and life! Third, we are to hold fast to him. There are many other things that compete for our affections, things we might lean on for comfort, or security, things we might look to for approval or power - a relationship, work, your intellect, your bank balance, alcohol, even your smartphone. Cling to them for life and they will turn to dust and ashes. No! The Lord Almighty is your life. Hold fast to him and him alone!

For Israel to turn away from the Lord God, to not obey and to worship other gods was to choose death. And so it is for us today. To reject Christ, to turn away from him is to reject God's offer of life and to choose instead death. The Lord God is your life. In the person of Jesus Christ he has given his life for you so that you might live. All else is dust and ashes. Will you this day choose life?