

Sermon 9th June 2024 Holy Communion: Gt Wishford Trinity 2

(Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3: 20-35)

CHOICES

John Humphrys, the so-called 'rottweiler' journalist, wrote recently about interviewing Margaret Thatcher on his morning radio show*. He was determined to make this an interview to be remembered and one with a far reaching impact, so he decided to trap her with what he thought was a fool proof question - about her Christian faith. She was bound to say, he thought, that Christianity was about love, charity and caring for the weak and vulnerable. Then he would immediately and conclusively wrong foot her by pointing out that her policies were blatantly NOT consistent with this. She would have to resign on the spot.

So, come the day, fired up with excitement he pounced.

"Mrs Thatcher, you have always described yourself as a committed Christian. Remind me, what is the essence of Christianity?"

But instead of the expected response for which he had prepared, she replied, quick as a flash, with one word 'CHOICE'. Well, JH was completely humiliated and flummoxed, and had to terminate the interview.

Choice. Choice between good and evil; right and wrong; who is IN and who is OUT... it sounds simple, black and white, but we know life is more complicated than that and it helps if we can be aware that there is much that can influence how we make our choices.

Tension for eg, Emotions and stress, and what other people think... – well -

I would like you to think for a while about the emotions that must have been present in the scenarios we have just heard about.

Let's start with Genesis: How were Adam and Eve feeling when God said don't take the fruit from the one tree. Discontent? Boredom – it's all too good to be true?- distrusting what God said – WHY can't we eat of this tree? We can eat of all the others... When the serpent comes along and reflects their thoughts back to them, they make their choice. Then comes Adam's shame, embarrassment, confusion, and sense of vulnerability - he decides to blame the woman. Eve, also confused and vulnerable, let down by her mate, continues this blame game and points to the serpent, the serpent who is the embodiment of evil, of wrong choices...

Adam and Eve had let their personal and selfish desires get the better of them and made a decision that would impact humanity for generations. Relationships – between humans and God, between men and women, human beings and creation, were fractured in an instant by selfish desire and disobedience. Of course, Adam and Eve are images of humanity, so, lest we fall into the same attitude of blame as Adam and Eve did, let us reflect on what WE would have done...

We move now to Our Gospel reading, which comes after a time of increasing pressure on Jesus and his disciples as his fame spreads. Picture the scene, feel the tension, and again, think about the emotions which were ratcheting up the persistent and ever increasing crowds, curious, demanding to see Jesus; the sick, the disabled, their relatives and friends all DESPERATE to get to Jesus, to touch him and be healed by him; the noise of the demons and the fearful shouts of those described as possessed, which nowadays we would recognise them as symptoms of mental anguish and illness; the defensiveness of the local scribes and pharisees – livid, insecure, protective of their entrenched position as keepers of the law – after all everything they knew was under threat because of the words and actions of this renegade loose cannon.

And to top it all, their superiors had now come from Jerusalem with their entourage to see what was going on – all adding to the chaos and noise and hubbub.

Jesus and his disciples tried to take refuge in a house but the throng of the crowd was proving impossible to ignore – they could not even eat. Imagine Jesus' family, perceiving him to be stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted – was he actually going mad as some in the crowd were suggesting? They felt they had to save him from himself. They had to go and get him and take him away. The impact of 'group think' must have been apparent and powerful, and was even undermining family relationships. No wonder Jesus looked around at his friends and those near him who believed in him and said 'these are my family'.

And like Jesus, sometimes we find ourselves in positions when we have to break away from the familiar to get our voices heard... Sometimes those we are closest to are the hardest to identify with, the hardest to explain to, the most critical and last to recognise our true selves...

The accusations were becoming more and more serious – how *did* Jesus cast out demons? - he must be one himself! Jesus with customary patience responds with a parable – Why would Satan destroy Satan? That makes *no* sense. He likens Satan to the strongman in a house, keeping prisoners; Satan is the top man who needs to be overcome and secured – tied up – before the inhabitants, the prisoners, those under his wicked control, can be freed. This is the hope Jesus brings us – He is the one who can destroy this force for evil and let the people go free. Only Jesus, acting in the power of the Holy Spirit, can do this and fulfil the prophecy in Isaiah and proclaim release to the captives, and let the oppressed free - free from the slavery to sin.

The scribes and pharisees, in their position of superiority and authority, choose to use that position to accuse Jesus of blasphemy, of acting in the power of evil spirit, and by doing this, they themselves blaspheme against the Holy Spirit.

This is a step too far. Jesus directs his words towards these scribes, saying it's ok to accuse him, that can be forgiven, but those who treat the Spirit of God as satanic cut themselves off from the source of all goodness and the possibility of forgiveness. God hates to see anyone excluded from eternal life but some people just refuse to accept it. Their choice - they exclude themselves.

And the sad thing is, that the noise of accusation spreads, and group think can easily take over – so much so that even Jesus' family started to believe what the loudest voices were saying. They too were in danger of making the wrong choice..

SO how do we make right decisions? As Mrs Thatcher said, Christianity is about God giving us as individuals the choice on how we live and act. It is up to us. But it is not always clear and easy. Right and wrong is not always black and white. It is important however, when we make choices, not just to consider our short term needs or the easy way, but also the needs of those who may have a quiet voice, or indeed the oppressed with no voice at all.

Let's try not to be influenced by group think, or by the strident voices of those who shout loudest. Let us put on the mantle of humility as demonstrated by Jesus Christ, listen to the Holy Spirit of God, and choose with integrity. We won't all agree, we will see things differently but we must be true to what we feel God is wanting us to do. It isn't easy, we cannot guarantee we will get it right, but let's make our decisions prayerfully, remembering we are the brothers and sisters of Christ, doing as best we can, the will of God.

- *John Humphrys: The Oldie June 2024 p14*