

Proper 18 Year C 2022 (RCL)

It isn't very often that we get a reading from the book Deuteronomy, and less often still that I would choose to comment on it in a sermon - but today, the words which have been put into the mouth of Moses as he addresses the whole of Israel sum up the theme of all today's readings - choose!

The wandering people of Israel are about to enter the land promised to them by God. Moses will not be going with them - he knows he will die - so he gathers them all together and preaches a long sermon. Moses is depicted as addressing the people as if they were the ones who had heard the word of God at Sinai, when they were given the Ten Commandments, even though that generation never made it to the Jordan, and the first readers of this text are looking back hundreds of years - and we are looking back thousands! But it doesn't matter, because even today we are standing on the banks of the Jordan, and face the same challenge. Will we choose life? Will we accept the life and the gifts God is offering, or will we choose to go our own way? Will we choose fatalism or even despair before an indifferent world, or self-righteousness (assuming ourselves to be superior to others, a form of 'holier than thou'), or apostasy (choosing to

worship other gods (money, buildings, ritual, prestige)? The challenge is before us and it is crystal clear. There can be no ifs or buts when we hear Moses - 'I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity'. We can worship the Lord or we can worship something else, but we cannot do both. To try to do both is to 'turn away and not hear', as Moses puts it (v17). 'I have set before you life and death', Moses tells them, and of course we know that time and again they chose death, turning away from the God with whom they were in covenant relationship, losing the land they were about to possess, going into exile and slavery, seeing their Temple destroyed, their cities razed to the ground.

As we stand on the brink today and listen to our Lord's words, we too have to choose - do we want life or death, death or eternal life? Really, do we have the courage and commitment to follow the one who is on his way to Jerusalem, to humiliation, torture and death? Jesus spells out the cost to the large crowd which is following him. It is strong language. There can be no half-measures. You will have to make tough decisions, hard choices. In the end, nothing and no-one (including closest family) must come between us and our calling to follow. Nothing can ever be more

important than carrying out the will of the one to whom we have pledged our lives. No wonder we are small in number. Luke tells us that a large crowd was following Jesus. I wonder how many of them turned back after they heard these words. They had seen the miracles, the healings, the feedings and they had heard the teaching and the offer of joy and mercy - 'he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty' - and so they followed, wanting to see what would happen next, enjoying being part of the action. So Jesus lays bare the consequences of being part of the action - because he wants followers, not hangers-on, disciples not opportunists. Can they, will they, pay the price? Can they, will they, take the risk? Choose. Choose life.

It is the same question which Paul puts to Philemon. Could he pay the price, take the risk. One thing is clear from this letter - Paul doesn't want to be the bossy autocrat - although he feels he could demand obedience from Philemon he instead appeals to his love. And Paul dares to contemplate a wealthy, Hellenistic Christian receiving back someone who has been a disobedient slave, and perhaps even a thief, as a spiritual equal, and as a brother in Christ, and he trusts Philemon not to fall back into the

reigning cultural practices of prestige, discrimination and violence which governed everyday life in those days. This is radical teaching - so radical that we still haven't got our heads around it; we are still obsessed with rank and authority. Paul challenges Philemon to allow the Holy Spirit to take up residence, and then move around the furniture; he is not to worry about what his neighbours might think, but 'welcome him as you would welcome me'. Quit worrying about social niceties and do what is just and right. It is a big ask. We don't know how the story ends, just as we don't know whether the father of the 'prodigal son' was ever reconciled with his self-righteous older son - 'all these years I have been working like a slave for you'. Jesus tells the story and leaves us to work out what he means. How do we read it? What would we do in similar circumstances? These questions need time to be answered. Given the challenges of today's readings, sit down and consider, like the tower builder. Sit down and consider, like the warring king. How much is this going to cost? Am I prepared, willing, to pay the price? Am I willing to let go of so many things and face the future in the company of Jesus.

'None of you can be my disciples unless he gives up all his possessions'. What do we make of that? Well, I wouldn't suggest you take it literally, because being destitute would not help anyone and would be a denial of your responsibilities - and put pressure on others - but it might be worthwhile spending some time thinking about your priorities in life.

Jesus is not gentle, meek and mild (especially not in Luke Ch 14). The challenge is radical, counter-cultural, difficult. It always has been and it always will be. So, will you choose, will you choose life?