

Black and White, and what to do

St Brandon's

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

4 September 2022

Would you like to remain standing, if you are able? I suggest that because it's pretty clear that Moses, in our OT reading delivered his valedictory words to the Israelites as they stood up (see Deut. 29:10), and I thought we should perhaps experiment with doing the same. Might it lead to even more out-standing sermons?!

On the other hand, you may have noticed in our Gospel reading that in the two examples Jesus gives – of the person intending to build a tower, and the king facing war – Jesus says that they both sit down first to give the matter serious attention. So, if you're willing this morning to give the matter (the sermon) serious attention, please do sit down!

Having said all that, both passages this morning are so clear, so black and white in their demands, that, while they do deserve serious attention, the message is never in doubt, and what to do next is abundantly clear. So you perhaps have already, or could, work out for yourselves what the message is, and what to do about it. Nonetheless, give me a moment to work it out with you.

Moses sets before the Israelites a clear choice, which is no choice at all. He sets before them life, prosperity, fertility and health (they will become numerous), blessings and length of days; or death, adversity, curses and foreshortened lives. Which should they choose? Well, it's what we would call today a 'no-brainer', isn't it? If you want to see this worked out in a humorous way, you need to watch Eddie Izzard's 'Cake or death' sketch, available on YouTube [EDDIE IZZARD - DRESS TO KILL - CAKE OR DEATH - YouTube](#), where he characterises the Church of England as offering cake or death. "You there, cake or death?", "Well, I'll have cake please." It is, as he says, a pretty easy question.

But, while Moses also seems to be asking a pretty easy question – life or death? – life does come with some conditions. You will have life, "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances". Oh. OK. So there is a serious question about what these conditions imply, which needs serious attention. It's good that you're sitting down, even if the choice is still basically black and white.

Jesus, in our Gospel reading, also spells out conditions for "whoever comes to me". In a similar way to Moses, He's offering a black and white choice to the large crowds who are travelling with Him: "If you want to come with me, then ...". And it does seem as though He's deliberately trying to put them off. I suspect that there was an element of that in what Jesus says, simply because large crowds were impractical on the journey He was making. And so, as He does quite regularly, Jesus seems to take things to the extreme in order to make His point: hate your family and even life itself; carry your cross; sit down first and work out the cost of discipleship; give up all your possessions.

Does Jesus mean all of this absolutely literally? Well, I'm not so sure that He does. If we were to look at a similar passage in Matthew's Gospel (10:37-39), we would find Him saying, "Whoever *loves* father or mother or son or daughter *more than* me is not worthy of me". So rather different from hating the members of your family. Though in Matthew's Gospel He does still speak of taking up the cross and following Him, and losing life for His sake in order to find it. In other words, don't think that following Jesus, while it will lead to life in abundance (John 10:10), doesn't also involve significant costs.

So, what are we to make of all of this? And it seems to me that the OT and Gospel readings are not so dissimilar in what they are saying. Obeying the commandments of the Lord your God, loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, is not so very different from loving God above all else, taking up your cross, and being prepared to lose your life in order to find it.

The choices – life or death, following Jesus or not – are black and white. But making the right choice – in our case, following Jesus in order to have life in abundance – carries with it serious implications.

I was wondering how best to illustrate this, how to consider what these serious implications are for us in practical terms. And in doing so, it took me to another instance of black and white in the Gospels – the sheep and goats in Matthew's Gospel. You'll probably recall the way this goes. Judgement is brought to bear on the nations, and the peoples are separated as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And the sheep are those to whom the king says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt. 25:35-36). These are the nuts and bolts of loving the Lord your God, and your neighbour as yourself, the two key commandments.

And you don't need me to tell you this morning of Ukrainian, and Syrian and Afghan and so on, refugees already in, or coming to, this country, the strangers in our midst. Or of the humanitarian crisis that is already upon us, this the sixth or seventh richest country in the world, as the cost of living crisis through energy prices and inflation begins to bite, so that we don't know if the poorest will stay alive through this coming winter, and millions more could be driven into penury. Some of us may be affected by and rightly fearful of all of this, and we need to find ways of supporting those of us in that situation. Some of us, on the other hand, will probably have resources and to spare.

And all of this is, of course, not just a personal issue, but a communal one and therefore a political one. We cannot and should not avoid that. So, in addition to whatever we as individuals, we as Church, might be able to do, there should also be a calling to account of our government, at different levels, where it is not doing enough, or is indeed making the situation worse rather than better. That is also part of our Christian commitment.

So, choose life not death. Choose following Christ rather than not following Him. But sit down first, and recognise the conditions that attach to the choice we make, and the serious

practical implications of it. And then, paradoxically because it leads to life in abundance, let us go out to live that out joyfully.

Amen.