

Sermon 21 January 2024 Choices

Galatians 6:7-10 John 17:20-26

Our Gospel passage is part of an extended prayer Jesus makes for his disciples prior to his arrest, but it a prayer that is relevant for us all, and in fact this passage begins with Jesus saying, *'I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me.'* It is a prayer that we will come to know Jesus, that we will all come to live in harmony with him.

Now the point I want to make is that choices play a very big part in whether we will come to know Jesus or not. Firstly, it is our choice whether we want this to happen or not. No one is going to force us into this relationship – it is totally and absolutely our choice.

Secondly, choices we make every day will determine whether this relationship is going to happen or not. What do I mean by that? Bottom line, if we are not obedient to God's will, if we persist in doing things that are contrary to his will (the simple word for that is 'sin', and there are varying degrees of sin), then this relationship is simply not going to happen. Nothing, but nothing, will get in the way quicker than choosing to do or say things that go against everything God wants us to do or say. Let me use an illustration, and perhaps I could begin by posing a question to our young people.

Who knows the story of Little Red Riding Hood? Now, Little Red Riding Hood got into some trouble because she made a couple of bad choices. She didn't listen to her mother who told her two things as she set out to visit her grandma. Firstly, she told her not to dawdle on her way there, but to go straight to her grandma's. And secondly, she told her not to speak to strangers. But what did Little Red Riding Hood do? She wandered into the woods to pick flowers, and she spoke to the big bad wolf. In other words, she was disobedient to her mother and because of that she got into trouble, big trouble.

In the same way, if we don't listen to what Jesus is telling us what to do, or what not to do, then our relationship with him will inevitably run into a little trouble. Jesus tells us we should help one another, so we could start at home by helping mum and dad. I was going to say you could help mum with the dishes and dad in the garden, but perhaps it should be dad with the dishes and mum in the garden! Jesus tells us not to use bad language, so when we swear, Jesus is not happy. What other things do you think might make Jesus unhappy?

Let's refer to our reading from Galatians. Paul makes it quite clear that everything has a consequence, both good and bad. If we make bad choices, bad things will happen. Yes, sins can be forgiven, but there still has to be consequences. During my time as Chaplain at King's College, it was sometimes put to me by miscreants that as Christian school, there shouldn't really be punishments as they should be forgiven. Nice try!

How on earth are we going to learn if there are no consequences to the poor choices we make? Yes, forgiveness can happen, and should happen, but there has to also be consequences. One of the consequences is the deterioration in our relationship with God.

I have always maintained that we should treat our relationship with God in the same way we treat any relationship. If we do something to upset someone, that will naturally jeopardise our relationship with that person. God gets upset when we do things that are contrary to his will, so it naturally follows that our relationship with him will be put at risk. John puts it very bluntly when he says, *'Anyone who does not obey God's commands and does not love other Christians, does not belong to God.'* 1 John 3:10. It doesn't come any plainer than that!

There is a very good verse in Psalm 119, which says, *'Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.'* Psalm 119:66. If we are to make the right choices in life, it is important that we get the right advice, that we consult the appropriate authority.

Perhaps I could again address the young members of our congregation. Tell me kids, if you wanted advice on how to play basketball, would you ask LeBron James or Humpty Dumpty? Playing rugby – Beauden Barrett or Captain Man? Singing – mum or dad?

To our congregation, if you want good advice on how you should live your life, would you read 'The Life and Times of Vladimir Putin', or the Bible? No brainer, I guess. My friends, if we are smart, this is where we will go for good advice. It is all in here. *'The word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword.'* Hebrews 4:12.

I want to finish by making two points. Firstly, those decisions we make every day, many of them not monumental decisions but invariably are about choosing to do or not to do something that would be considered to be aligned with what we know and believe is right, actually say a lot about the sort of people we are. American author and speaker, Marianne Williamson, said, *'Every decision you make reflects your evaluation of who you are.'*

The second point is this, following on from the words from Psalm 119, it is important that we look to our faith when making any decision. Dorothy Mendoza Row, spiritual director, said, *'When faced with a decision, choose the path that feeds your soul.'* And another quote, from an anonymous source, though I do believe he has something to do with that very high profile church, St Paul's in the Park, *'Always make decisions that prioritise your faith.'*