

## **SERMON: The Choices We Make as Disciples of Jesus – Jeremiah 18.1-12 ; Luke 14.25-35**

Dear Father, we thank you that you have given us responsibility to make our own choices in life. May we strive to choose what you would want us to do and we thank you for forgiving us when we don't. Amen

Every day of our life we have to make choices, don't we? One I suspect we've been making all winter is: Will I get out of bed now even though the room is freezing or stay under the warm doona?

Of course some of our choices are much more significant than others. And every choice we make has a consequence. Last week Revd Judy spoke of some of the more difficult choices many people are faced with: How do we choose not to overindulge on all the earthly temptations that we face every day? And today is the first Sunday in the Season of Creation so it also raises the question of how do we choose to care for God's creation?

As I explore our Old Testament and Gospel readings today it will be through this prism of "choice".

### **Jeremiah 18.1-12**

When I reflected on each of our readings today, initially I saw absolutely no connection between them all but I was drawn to the Jeremiah prophecy. It begins with God telling Jeremiah to "*Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.*" Here is the first choice. Jeremiah didn't have to listen to and act upon the message from God. He could have just said: "Nah- I'm tired today, I'll just stay at home and relax." But he didn't. He chose to do exactly what God told him to do. This was by no means the first time that God had spoken to Jeremiah. As Judy explained last week he was called to be a prophet from a young age. So he had many such experiences over three or four decades and learnt the importance of following whatever was asked of him.

The more Jeremiah chose to listen and act, the more God could trust Jeremiah to deliver his message. And I suggest that that is the same for us today. God, our loving parent, wants to talk to each one of us. But if we don't listen then He can't bless us with His message. On the other hand the more we do open our hearts and minds to God's guidance the more he can and will share with us. While I was in London I had a choice to go to a service at St Paul's Cathedral or at the Holy Brompton Church, the birthplace of all the Alpha courses. I felt a nudge to go to Holy Brompton but ignored it and went instead to St Paul's. It was a wonderful experience but afterwards I heard God gently say to me: "I had a gift for you at Holy Brompton". Have you ever planned a wonderful surprise

for someone you love only to have it thwarted by them not turning up to the right place at the right time? I could feel God's disappointment.

My choice, my consequence, our forgiving, loving Father.

I invite you to reflect now on something God has spoken to you about. If you have acted on it and it bore fruit, then give our Lord the praise. If you're wrestling with something now and you aren't sure if it's really God talking to you, then ask Him for clear confirmation and perhaps talk later to a trusted Christian friend. Or if you're feeling the nudge from the Spirit to say or do something but find yourself resisting it, ask Him to show you whatever the block may be.

*Time for silent reflection*



Turning back to Jeremiah on this occasion he did as he was told and went down to the potter's house. Has anyone ever made some pottery?

Verse 4 describes the potter at his wheel: *"The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he re-worked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him."*

Now comes the interesting part. In verse 6 He declares: *"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done? Says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."*

This is a clear statement of the power of God the creator, but His sovereignty and control is not capricious. Verses 7 to 11 explain to the people of Judah the consequences of their choices. At one moment God may declare that he will destroy a nation but if they turn from evil ***He will change His mind***. At another moment the reverse could happen. God may declare to build up a nation but they do evil and don't listen to Him so he will ***again change His mind*** and not do the good he had intended. So, in verse 11, Jeremiah is told to tell the people of Judah and Jerusalem: *"Thus says the Lord: Look I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings."*

Verse 12 makes it clear what their choice is:

*"But they say, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will."*

The consequence of their choice was to see the destruction of the temple and the forced exile of the Israelites to Babylon. Last week Revd Judy spoke of the blessings God gave Israel when they turned to Him and the hardships they went through when they didn't. She also alluded to the addictions we can face in our life that turn us from God. Theologian Stanley Frost suggests that in verse 12, *"like the addict, Israel knows its plight, but also knows it cannot reform. The comment puts its finger on the weakness of the prophetic teaching- it lacked a gospel. That was to come later."*

### **Luke 14.25-35**

It is to that gospel that I will now turn. Left to our own devices we, like Jeremiah's Israel, so often follow our own stubborn evil will. But therein lies the beauty and wonder of the gospel message. We are not alone. We have Jesus. What does that mean for us? Who is Jesus to us? (invite responses)

The bible of course tells us a great deal about Jesus. He is:

- Our King who rules us with justice and mercy
- Our saviour who endured pain and humiliation to rescue us from our sin
- Our friend who walks beside us through thick and thin
- Our brother who loves us for all eternity
- Our forgiver who keeps on forgiving us no matter how many times we fail Him
- Our strength who gives us the power to keep persevering no matter what hardships we face
- Our hope who promises to return to fulfil God's kingdom on earth.

When we truly understand and accept these things the choice to be a follower of Jesus becomes an obvious step to take. But as I said at the start, all choices have consequences. And in the section of Luke, Jesus honestly tells his disciples that following Him also comes at a cost.

He explains this cost in three separate ways. First in verse 26 He dramatically speaks of the need for disciples *“to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself...”*. This sounds offensive to modern ears but in ancient Middle eastern times, the word hate didn’t hold the same emotional intensity that we give it today. Back then it was a matter of priorities. As Charles Swindoll explains: *“Jesus didn’t want His disciples to cultivate a deep loathing for people or to treat others cruelly. He called for them to make a clear, definable, decisive choice to make Him their number one priority over all relationships, including love for self.”*

The second cost is described in verses 27 to 32: *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”* Everyone hearing these words spoken would have understood the humiliation and public scorn poured on any prisoner who was forced to bear the Roman cross of crucifixion. Jesus is warning His disciples that they will be subjected to humiliation and scorn by their own community and so they need to weigh up all the costs about discipleship before making an informed choice to follow Him.

The third cost is described in verse 33: *“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”* There are ample other examples within the bible which suggest that followers of Jesus do not have to forsake literally every single item they own. Rather, Swindoll suggests that *“the point here is to avoid an emotional attachment to money or possessions. Again, it’s a matter of priorities...And in terms of your possessions, commit them to God’s service, whether they remain in your possession or not. Disciples must let no **thing** possess them. Hold everything loosely.”*

Do we choose to pay the cost of discipleship? If we do, then Jesus tells us in verses 34 and 35 that we are like true salt, fulfilling the role we’ve chosen. But if we don’t then we lose our saltiness and our discipleship becomes ineffectual.

This may sound a bit harsh, but it is important to note that whatever we do or don’t do as disciples, **does not affect** the fact that we are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus. Yet, God does long for us to grow in our discipleship because he knows that we will find the greatest personal joy when we do and be the best witness to His Son!

Let me finish in prayer:

Beloved Father, we thank you for giving us the freedom to choose to follow Jesus. Please grant to us an ever deeper understanding of how we may become the disciples that you wish us to be. Amen