

The political gets personal

You might picture the scene in your mind's eye. The people of Israel have been liberated from slavery in Egypt. They have spent a generation wandering in the wilderness and now they are ready to enter the land that God had promised to give them. So what does their leader, Moses, do? Well, he gathers them together on the edge of the Jordan river and there he preaches a sermon to them about how they are to live as God's people in their new land. And for Moses there is one key. Central to what he has to say to the Israelites is the importance of God's Law, the Law given to them on the mountain while they were still in the wilderness. For Moses everything hinges on obedience to God's commandments. And prior to our passage this morning Moses has spelled out that Law and exactly the kind of life that it entails. Law, after all, can be double-edged: it can be repressive or it can be liberating; it can oppress people or it can enable a society to flourish. And for Moses the Law is fundamentally about choice, the purpose of the Law being quite simply to enable them to make right choices. These people, after all, had come out of Egypt. The laws of Egypt had made it an oppressive place and the Israelites had been set free from it and there was to be no going back to that kind of society. And this Law of God was designed for a liberated people, instructing them in right choices to ensure that they remained liberated.

What we have to notice here is that human beings are presented here as caught, as it were, between the two opposing forces of life and death. To be human means to stand continually at the crossroads where we encounter forces that work for good and for life and for blessing, and forces that work for evil and for death and for cursing – and we must choose, and our choices lead us down one road or the other. So listen again to Moses: 'See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...', and he goes on and then repeats it, saying, 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.' These are the options: life or death and we must choose. And in today's world we exalt choice. It has become society's golden calf that we should have endless, unlimited choice. But what good is that if we cannot make right choices, wise choices, life-giving as opposed to death-dealing choices?

Any of you out there who are film buffs, when you hear those words from Deuteronomy about choosing life, might be reminded of a cult classic film which has just recently had its sequel released. I refer to the film *Trainspotting* and its sequel *T2*. The films are about a group of drug-addicts from Edinburgh and in the original film there is a vivid monologue spoken by the main character, a young man called Renton, which I'll read. Unfortunately this quotation contains some very ripe language, so you will hear it with all expletives deleted. This rather bluntens its force but is more seemly for this gathering. So, in a passionate monologue Renton says this:

‘Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a **** big television, Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin can openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of **** fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who **** you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing **** junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all... nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, **** brats you have spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future...’

And Renton concludes:

‘Choose life . . . But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?’

Here Renton is being asked to choose, to choose, to choose, to choose life - but this consumerist version of life is not one that he wants. Endless accumulation of goods, stock-piling personal comforts and acquisitions, devoid of any sense of greater purpose or meaning – he's not interested. And in what Bob Dylan calls ‘this version of Death we call Life’ Renton chooses heroin. Like many so drug addicts Renton is the product of a society that makes foolish choices, choices that offer life but that deal death.

Back, then, to Moses and Deuteronomy: ‘today... I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses.’ And there are surely many of us this morning who can't help but feel somehow that we're making the wrong

choices, that this dust of death that blows through Renton's world is blowing through ours too, in other ways. And I'm not just talking here about the results of a particular election or a referendum which you may or may not agree with. I'm talking about the choices that lie behind these things. I'm talking about the choices that have led to a world where refugees come knocking at our doors; the choices that have led to an underclass that are sick and tired of elites and political classes; the choices that have led to racism and xenophobia. I'm talking about the choices that have led to growing disparities of wealth and poverty; the choices that create the climate in which terrorism can fester; the choices that are leading to ecological catastrophe. These are the choices that lead to death and to curses rather than to life and to blessing. They are the choices that shape our world.

Then we turn to our Matthew passage from the Sermon on the Mount and there is continuity here with our passage from Deuteronomy, but also contrast. The continuity lies in the fact that Jesus' teaching here is also about the power of death at work in our world. Jesus talks here about violence and anger and the callous dismissal of another human being as a fool; and he talks about lust and the objectifying of another human being and its effect upon marriage; and he talks about swearing falsely: and all these are manifestations of the power of death. All these involve choices that destroy life and here we are on common ground with Deuteronomy. But there is, however, also discontinuity, difference between Deuteronomy and the Sermon on the Mount. You see, Deuteronomy is social teaching. It's about the good society. It's about Law and creating a society that contrasts with the vicious world of Egypt. But here in the Sermon on the Mount we probe deep beneath social and legal teaching – and into the individual, the personal realm. Here Jesus pushes deep into the world of our thoughts and our hearts: so adultery is not just about a Law carved on tablets of stone, it's about what we think and imagine in our minds. Murder is not just about laws prohibiting killing, it's about harbouring anger and arrogance towards others. Swearing falsely is not about legal oaths, it's about honouring God and hallowing God's name. In other words we move here away from the realm of law and the external - to the realm of the human heart and the internal. This is all about being people of integrity. It's about being people of virtue, of character. It's about being people who know how to deal with anger, people who know how to handle lust, people whose yes means yes and whose no means no. And the point is that a good society needs virtuous

people. This was one of the philosopher Aristotle's great themes – the connection between the good society and good and virtuous people.

All of which brings us back to our world today, our troubled and fractious world. For those of us who are disillusioned with certain trends and certain developments it's easy to point the finger out there. What is wrong with people? Where does all this xenophobia and misogyny come from? And some of us wring our hands at the rise of a hard right that seems to backtrack on progress that we thought we had made. These are hard times for people who might think of themselves as enlightened and progressive. But wherever you are coming from one reaction – not the only reaction but one reaction – is to look to ourselves, to deep within, and to consider how we are shaping up as virtuous people. How do we treat others? How do we handle anger and lust and arrogance? Are we people of character and virtue and integrity?

Back in the 1970s there was a phrase that became common currency, even though no-one was quite sure exactly where it had come from. It was the phrase 'the personal is the political'. The context was a wave of feminism that emerged in the last '60s and early '70s and the point that was being made was that issues associated with feminism: sexism, contraception, abortion, childcare, domestic roles etc were not just personal and private matters. They were social and political issues that required structural and systematic change. The personal was political. Well, it seems to me to be a slogan that applies to the Christian faith. For too long Christian faith has been construed as 'personal' in the sense that it is private and has no place in the public square. Faith needs to be separated from politics. Thank God that delusion has gone. Some of us feel that certain current trends in society are an affront to our faith and our Christian convictions. The danger, however, is that we end up locating the problem 'out there'. We blame 'society'. The problem is with other people who have certain prejudices and opinions we profoundly disagree with. And we shake our heads in anger and disbelief. Well, maybe this is an invitation to self-examination as to what kind of people we are. Maybe this is a moment for the political to get personal. Maybe this is a call to examine ourselves.

Our readings this morning take us from Deuteronomy to the Sermon on the Mount. They take us from Law written on tablets of stone to Law written on the heart. They take us from the political to the personal. They move us from asking what kind of society we live in to what kind of people we are. How does the power of death operate in your life and mine? How do we handle

destructive forces like anger and lust? How do we show courtesy and respect to one another? And are we people of integrity whose yes can be relied upon to mean yes and no to mean no?

When the world is driving us to despair, maybe it's time for the political to get personal. Amen.

Loving God,

It is your truth alone, which can change hearts; your healing power which can transform troubled souls; your Spirit which can move mountains of despair.

So we pray today, Lord, for change in places where tradition has a stranglehold on vision; where fear prevents the hope of a better future; where injustice is ingrained and the same voices shout the loudest. Lord, let there be change.

We pray for transformation in hearts left cold by hurt; in lives destroyed by loneliness; in bodies held to ransom by pain and souls crying out for relief. Lord, let there be transformation.

We pray for healing for those known to us who are troubled in body, mind and spirit. May they know your presence in the comfort of others and in your timeless promises fulfilled Christ Jesus, our Saviour. Lord, let there be healing.

We pray for movement, Lord. in our churches that the past may not dictate the present or the possible; in our communities that entrenched opinions may be challenged and shaken;

in our world that reconciliation and peace may become an achievable reality and not just a dream of the hopeful. Lord, let there be movement.

And we pray, Lord, for ourselves, here in this congregation, that we may together offer help, hope and encouragement to one another and to those in need.

May you continue to encounter and to confront us along the pathways of life, Lord, that our faith may be strengthened and transformed making us worthy of your blessing and ready in your service. Amen.