

SERMON 25.11.07

The choice is yours

Bible reading: Luke 23: 33-43

Choices.

Election yesterday. Mr Rudd's words in his victory speech, 'Today the nation has decided ...' People made a choice about the government they wanted.

We make simple choices everyday – clothes, food. There are complex choices made over a period of time – career, moving home.

Yesterday, I conducted a marriage ceremony for a couple who have been living together for some time. They decided that their relationship was important enough to make a public commitment to each other in marriage. They made a choice.

Last Sunday we celebrated with two baptisms. Baptism is a definitive choice about the direction of your life and about whom you are following. It marks the end of the old way of living according to your rules, and the start of a new life according to God's way.

The Bible reading is a passage that we usually only hear read at Easter time. When we hear the story at a time other than Easter, because we are not expecting to hear it, different aspects may be highlighted for us. When we hear it a week away from entering the Advent season, and the lead-up to Christmas, it brings the reason for Jesus' birth into a central place in our thinking.

In my preparation during the week, my prayer and reading has not been about what I think you need to hear, but what are the important things that God wants us to pay attention to from this reading that will make a difference in our personal life, and that will make a difference to the way we function as a church.

The focus of the Bible reading from Luke's gospel is what happened as Jesus hung on the cross. Luke writes, 'When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left.' *Luke 23: 33* The reference to 'skull' may be because the hill looked like a skull or because it was where the Romans often crucified enemies of the state and skulls could easily be found there. When it was translated into Latin, the word 'Calvary' was used, because the Latin word for skull is 'calvaria'. It would have been a public place where the Romans made sure everyone could see what happened to anyone who opposed them.

At this place of execution, the responses and attitudes of the people there fell basically into three groups.

One response came from the rulers who sneered at Jesus; the soldiers who mocked him; and one of the two criminals who was executed with Him hurled insults at Him. 'He saved others, let Him save Himself if He is the Messiah.' *V35*. 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.' *V37* 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.' *V39*.

The irony is that Jesus did not save Himself from death on the cross, but the work of

salvation was being done while He was on the cross. He did save others – He saved the world. But people did not understand what was going on nor did they believe that He was the Saviour of the world.

The cross is a place of salvation. What is it for you? The intersection of the vertical beam and the horizontal beam becomes a point of decision, the crux of the matter. Are you with the rulers and the soldiers and one of the criminals who was executed with Jesus, sneering at Him? What is it for the church? At times, the church has to stand for good in the face of evil. At times, putting up with the criticisms of people who don't understand what we are doing, or misinterpreting our motives.

In the face of all that evil and cruelty – let's not forget that crucifixion was a horribly violent, agonising form of torture – the words from Jesus demonstrate what was happening in God's work of redemption. 'Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."' V34

The cross is a place of forgiveness. When we take up our cross and follow Jesus, as He asked us to, we accept forgiveness, but we also bear it as a quality that is to be expressed to others. That's tough – it's hard. We want to lash out when we are hurt. I am not minimising people's experiences of pain and suffering at the hands of others. I've seen enough of life to know that forgiveness is not something that can be rushed or even expected. However, it means having the willingness to carry a forgiving spirit which may, by the power and grace of God, result in an experience of forgiveness. Think carefully about Jesus' words from the cross – He asked God to forgive His killers. He didn't say at that point, 'I forgive'.

The second response is from the other criminal, who said: 'We have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' V41.

The cross is a place of honesty. Nothing is hidden. Nothing can be hidden. It is where we face who we really are, where we realise our sin, both what is done and what is not done, where we realise we can never be good enough to save ourselves from our own weaknesses. When we come to the end of our own resources, our own ways of trying to fix up our lives, we can utter the cry of help - 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' V42. Jesus' response was: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.' V43 Jesus offered more than what the man asked. Not something in the future, but something in the immediate present. Today.

The cross is the place of hope for today and for tomorrow. While the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothes, while others sneered and hurled abuse, there was this humble way in which He dealt with the man on the cross beside Him. Here is One who never turned away, and still does not turn away, from anyone seeking help. This is a place to which I need to go many times. Do you? What does it mean for the church to bear the cross in places where it is not welcome? Yet places where honesty and hope are needed. I trust that each one of us can be bearers of the cross into situations, into people's lives, into places of darkness, where people feel destroyed by life, sometimes by their own choices. Remember Jesus never turns away – it's we who turn our backs at times.

The third response is contained in these words: ‘The people stood watching’.

V35. Neither hurling insults nor believing. Waiting to make a decision about who Jesus is. Not sure. Maybe having questions and doubts. Why would a good man end up on a cross? Why do good people suffer? There are people today who watch – and wait. They might see what the church does, but it’s not really for them. They might wonder what goes on in here when the doors are open. It mightn’t make much sense to them. What will make sense though is when you and I become involved in people’s lives out there and as they watch, they might be able to see a difference.

‘The church is a movement launched into the life of the world to bear in its own life God’s gift of peace, shalom, the all-embracing blessing of God for the life of the world.’ Leslie Newbigin

That’s what mission means. It flows from the cross, from the heart of God through the sacrificial life and love of Jesus, through the church to the world. I have a vision of this church where mission flows in and out of this place, and in and out of our lives.

If you ask me where Jesus is today – He is here. He is also with the people down at the Relay for Life.

If you ask me where Jesus was during the week – He was in court as one of our members supported someone. He was here in this place when someone not connected with us came deeply depressed needing to talk. He was in the schools when volunteers from churches in the area went in to teach their weekly Christian education lesson. He was here in this place when people came for friendship and a meal, and found encouragement in their loneliness.

The love of God is not locked up in a church building. It’s carried in you as you take up your cross and follow Jesus into the places where He leads.

The cross is a place of decision. What have you decided about Jesus? How does that decision affect the way you live? What difference will it make?

Three responses: abuse; belief; wondering.

The cross is a place of salvation, a place of forgiveness, a place of honesty, a place of hope for today and tomorrow, a place of decision.

What is your response?

Sources:

Leslie Newbigin quoted in Gerard Kelly with Ben Wickham, *The Six Habits of Highly Connected People* (Cumbria: Spring Harvest, 2003), p64.

Web-site: Sermon Nuggets, Lindy Black: <http://home.twcny.rr.com/>

Web-site: Faith and Worship: <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/>