

August 18 - 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Choose Life

1 Kings 2.10-12; 3.3-14, Psalm 111 (p.343), Ephesians 5.11-21, John 6.51-58

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs has said that there are 3 ways in which God's Word might speak to us. The first is from the Book, the second is from teachers, and the third is from life. As we open God's word today, I invite you to allow these 3 things to speak to you, bringing challenge and reassurance, wonder and comfort, and bringing together what is already in your heart and what you might discern this day.

In the Old Testament reading, we have Solomon coming to the great responsibility of kingship. The people have had previous kings, not because it was God's will initially, but because they begged the Lord for a king.

King Saul was the first. He united all the tribes under a single king and his other strength was that of military leadership. In this he fulfilled what the people wanted when they asked for a king. His great fault was that he turned away from the Lord and was not genuine and sincere in repentance. Saul's son Ish-bosheth reigned briefly for 2 years but we know little of him except that he did not accept David's anointing as Saul's successor and was subsequently killed by 2 of his own captains.

King David was next. He was also imperfect, but he was described as a man after God's own heart. He sinned greatly, even committing adultery and murder, but his repentance of sin was genuine, even when the price he had to pay was one of great sorrow, grief and loss.

King Solomon was the son of King David, so this is the real beginning of hereditary leadership for the people, if we do not count Ish-bosheth. What was Solomon famous for? [Answers? Wisdom, building the temple, etc.]

In today's reading we hear Solomon asking God for wisdom, to help him with the daunting task of governing the people. Solomon displayed a sense of humility and of responsibility for his position, rather than a sense of entitlement. What did Solomon ask for specifically? [...]

It was not to be a great military leader like Saul or to be greatly loved like David, but for "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." The very next verse says, "It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this." and of course Solomon's request was granted.

Can you think of another place in the Bible where there was a similar desire for discernment of good and evil?

It seems at first thought that this was in the Genesis 2 story of humankind and the tree of knowledge (knowledge of good and evil), but there are differences and a reason why God forbade the eating of that fruit.

Genesis 1.1 to Genesis 2.4 gives the first account of creation. Genesis 2.5 begins this second account of creation. The second account is different. These 2 accounts are both in the Bible so they both matter.

The easiest way to tell these 2 accounts apart is the order in which things and people are described as being created. In the first account of creation, humans are described as being created together. It says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1.27) and God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food." (Genesis 1.29)

In the second account, the man is made first as the first human. And the woman is created when God saw that it was not good to be alone and so God created another human for companionship and to share the God-given tasks and responsibilities. So, in this second account there was man and then there was woman.

Before the creation of the woman, the man is told, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." So good and evil are associated with life and death. To know both good and evil is to know not just life but also death.

However, there is difference between the description of knowing good and evil in Genesis and Solomon's request in 1 Kings. The Hebrew word for knowledge in Genesis 2.17 could equally be the verb knowing. So that verse could be "the tree of knowing good and evil." If you compare that with other uses of this word "knowing" in the scriptures, there is a sense of something more than being aware that something exists and being able to identify it.

Every person here today has known good times and bad times. That is more than knowing the difference between good and bad. It is actually experiencing good times and bad, with all that that brings. That experience also helps you with subsequent decision-making, as you recognise what is life-giving and what is not. To know both good and evil is to know and experience not just life but also death, actual or metaphorical.

In the Bible life and death sometimes means simply physical life and physical death, and sometimes it means all that leads to life and all that leads to death, both physically and spiritually. Some of you may remember Sammy Davis Junior singing, "I want to live, not merely survive." In the book of Deuteronomy, the LORD says, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." And "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." (Deuteronomy 30.15, 19)

It is then made explicit that the good life, the life of blessings and well-being, is a life lived in God's ways. Life in all its fullness, following God's commandments, is associated with prosperity and blessing while death is associated with adversity and curses. Good is the way of Life, while evil is the way of Death. Choose life.

Our psalm today, Psalm 111, gives a beautiful picture of the good life, of what living in God's way might look like.

Solomon wanted to live a good life, a godly life, serving God and God's people. He asked for help with this. Solomon asked for the ability to discern good and evil, to be able to tell the difference, and the Lord was pleased to grant this request.

Our reading from Ephesians is a reminder rather than a revelation. Paul reminds us to be who we are as God's people and followers of Jesus. As Sammy Davis Junior sings, "Who else can I be but what I am." When we consider the big questions about ourselves as Christians, the first one is, Who are we in Christ? The one that follows is addressed by today's reading. If that is who we are, how shall we live?

There are a lot of possible answers to this, but today's reading from Ephesians is a good summary. It encompasses us, God and our neighbours.

How should we live for ourselves? Understand what the will of the Lord is, be careful how you live, and make the most of the time. The assumption is that if you are careful how you live and are making the most of the time, you are doing your best to live according to the will of the Lord.

How should we live for God? Give thanks to God the Father at all times and give thanks for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How should we live for our neighbour? Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So, lead a godly life with gratitude to God and love, respect and consideration for your neighbour. Choose life.

Our Gospel reading is much more specifically attuned to our relationship with Jesus and the life we find in him. It has been said that John's Gospel is the Gospel of life. His Gospel talks about life more than all the other Gospels put together. This reading brings a strong and vivid message about following Jesus, the bread of life. So many of the words in this reading cover eating, drinking, bread, flesh, blood and life, or variations on these words. It is as though John is telling us that our very existence is dependent on Jesus - our body, mind, heart and soul. All of what we are.

If we are in him and he is in us, can we walk in his shoes, see the world through his eyes, be sustained by his life in us, and live the life he asks us to live?

I am going to stop there, on the questions, because in the end we all need to find the answers that tell us personally, in our particular circumstances, how to live the life Jesus asks us to live.

I invite you to reflect, pray, and choose life!