

'The choice is yours!'

Sermon for Pentecost 5 by Mark Pilgrim: Matthew 13.24-30

Well, what interesting choices we have before us at the moment! Which restaurant are you going to spend the government's £10 in on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday evening between now and the end of August – to help the hospitality industry? Where are you going to go away for a holiday to – to help the local economy? Which family members or friends are you going to get together with – to offer some help and support and maybe spread a little love and cheer all round? Or do you judge all such activities to be fool-hardy...and the best thing to do, painful as it maybe, is to stay in just that little bit longer and really try and knock the spread of Covid 19 on the head?

Members of the Sailing Club I belong to have displayed the full range of these reactions. One jumped the gun and got out on the water when they really shouldn't have done so. For them the benefits of getting some exercise and fresh air through sailing were more important than the risk of imposing an unnecessary burden on the health services. Others – not in the vulnerable category – reckon the health risks are so high, they are choosing not to sail when, ordinarily, they would be sailing very regularly.

It was difficult enough knowing what the right thing to do was in pre-Covid times: the choices before us as Lockdown begins to relax can be more numerous, more complex and more serious than ever they were before the virus took its hold. It's not just our well-being, our finances and our health that's at issue: it's very much other people's well-being, other people's finances and other people's health that's at issue as well. Everybody's condition has to be taken into account: and knowing which path to take, when confronted with routes whose end points are impossible to see from here, can be very tricky indeed.

Where can we turn for help?

Well, Jesus' parable about the wheat and the weeds, from today's Gospel passage, is one possibility. Why? Because the parable helps us face and then deal with ambiguity. The whole parable turns on the fact that, yes, the farm hands can see what is in front of them – but, no, which plant is wheat and which is weed isn't clear: the one looks like the other. To reap a good harvest, the workers have to pick the wheat. If they pick weeds, it will sully and ruin all they have been asked to do. In telling this parable Jesus seems to be telling his listeners: 'Don't be surprised to face uncertainty and ambiguity in life. It happens to all of us. It's everyone's destiny not to know exactly, for sure, which is the right and which is the wrong path. At these times we have to take a risk. We have to be prepared to make mistakes. We have to live with uncertainty and ambiguity.'

What, then, is the lesson, the parable leaves us with? I suggest it's this: turn your worries over to God. God will do the sorting out. Note this, however: there's no guarantee that, in turning our concerns over to God, everything will turn out just fine. Sometimes we don't choose well. Sometimes things go wrong. Christian faith doesn't promise to prevent hardship – just the opposite! It promises to involve sacrifice. No, the promise of Christian faith is that what makes us right with God, what 'justifies' us, isn't our right choices. Our justification, our 'being right with God' comes only from God's grace, through faith. Marvellously, Christian faith goes on to promise that God looks at us and loves us with unconditional affection and affirmation despite our poor choices.

The thing is, you see, we don't live in an ideal world: each week we're faced with a myriad of challenging decisions, some small and others large, to which there is no clear answer. Some decisions we'll get right, others wrong. Still others we won't know whether we were right or wrong for months or years to come. But we still need to make them. Then, each week, no matter how we fared, we can come to worship, to be reminded that God loves us anyway. God promises to hold all our choices and all our lives together in love.

I'm going to offer you now two quotes on the extent of God's mercy in the face of the uncertainty and ambiguity we face in the world today. Could you reflect on and maybe even learn one of them in the week ahead? The first quote is this: 'In a world coloured by ambiguity, the only absolute is found in absolutism'. The second quote is: 'The only secure reality is the anarchic mercy of God which ignores order, rank and merit.' Both quotes offer God's mercy as what fallible human beings should and can depend on. Which set of words do you prefer? The choice is yours! The first has alliteration – three instances of 'ab' to attract our attention and offer help in recalling it: 'In a world coloured by **amb**iguity, the only **abs**olute is found in **abs**olutism'. The second - from the pen of Rowan Williams – contains an intriguing paradox. The only secure, certain thing, Rowan says, is the unruly, anarchic, unpredictable mercy of God. This is doubly unsettling because this 'secure' thing ignores the security and certainty of order, rank and merit. Here's the quote again: 'The only secure reality is the anarchic mercy of God which ignores order, rank and merit.' Talk about an upside-down world! God's kingdom is it!

Throughout last week the Old Testament readings for Morning Prayer invited those attending to hear the story of Samson. Are you one of those people who, as soon as you hear the name Samson, immediately hear 'and Delilah'? How many of you, I wonder, then also hear Tom Jones belting out 'My, my, my Delilah!' in your head? But I digress. Samson is one of the big figures in the Old Testament. He's on a par with Goliath, the giant slain by the shepherd boy David. Samson is portrayed in art in the final moments of his life as a blinded giant bringing down a building with his own strength, causing the death of thousands of Philistines as well as his own, as the climax of a struggle between Yahweh and the Philistine god, Dagon. It's a struggle in which, through Samson's sacrifice, Yahweh is victorious. I wonder, however, whether, if you read Judges 14, 15 and 16 as we did, you would be appalled by Samson's back story. To borrow a phrase from Monty Python's 'Life of Brian' Samson is 'not a Messiah. He's a very naughty boy!'

Like us, Samson goes through life with some choices made for him and others he has to make for himself. His fervently religious parents dedicate him as a Nazirite at his birth – which is the equivalent of being a strict Pharisee in Jesus' time. Despite his upbringing in this strict path, Samson is prodigiously wayward. He bullies his loving parents into getting him married to a beautiful Philistine girl a Nazirite should never have contact with but whom he decides to marry without first speaking to her. He kills a lion with his bare hands and then has contact with his parents, making both him and them unclean in a way which is utterly anathema to the Nazirite code of conduct. When Samson's marriage doesn't work out, he gets involved with a prostitute and more death and destruction ensues. Finally, he falls in love with Delilah. Tempted by her charms and blinded by love for her, he succumbs to her request to tell him the secret of his strength. Cutting off the long hair which is fundamental to Samson's identity as a Nazirite, Samson loses his strength and is captured and blinded by Delilah's Philistine controllers. But as his hair begins to grow, his strength returns – the power of Yahweh courses through his body and he sacrifices his own life in order to bring victory to Yahweh over the Philistine god, Dagon. It is a story of redemption as dramatic as Moses going from murderer of an Egyptian to liberator of Israel in the Old Testament; as dramatic as Paul going from Christian persecutor to prime Christian apostle, in the New Testament. Despite betraying the fine upbringing he had with wayward choice after wayward choice, God is nevertheless present and active in Samson's life. Throughout these chapters, the phrase 'then the spirit of the Lord rushed on him' appears again and again – but it's a spirit which Samson refuses to influence his actions. He ploughs on, disobeying his Nazirite education and going his own way regardless. All the time, however, Yahweh is with him, regarding him, attentive to what Samson is doing and the mistakes he is making. And Yahweh never gives up. At his moment of greatest weakness, the spirit of God in Samson comes to the fore and Samson puts witness to the love of God for the Israelites before his own life and passions. The whole story can be read as a colourful dramatization of the choices – with uncertain, ambiguous consequences – that face us all.

Will we, like Samson, find truth in one of the quotes I offered earlier? Do you recognise that 'In a world coloured by ambiguity, the only absolute is found in absolutism'? As you make choices in our Covid 19 threatened world this week, will you agree with Rowan Williams that 'The only secure reality is the anarchic mercy of God which ignores order, rank and merit'? Over to you. The choice is yours!