

**Choose life**

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20; I Corinthians 3:1-9*

It's not very often that a news report brings tears to my eyes, but last week, watching the news reports coming from Turkey and Syria, it happened. The death toll has passed 25,000 people, and the fear is that when the count is complete, particularly from outlying rural areas, the number will be even higher.

A Turkish man in Edinburgh believes he has lost at least 120 members of his near and extended family. Initially support called for was food, warm clothing and blankets. But this will change to the need for money channelled through a variety of charity and government sources which can be targeted more directly. It is beyond desperate.

Even before the earthquake disaster it has been estimated that in Northwest Syria some 4 million people were in need because of the long-forgotten civil war there that has slipped away from our headlines. Nearly 3 million have been displaced by this long conflict, around 80% of whom are women and children.

People all over the world are facing, and dealing with, life and death issues every day. Some may be more dramatic than others, but whether the scale is international or local or personal, people feel beleaguered, beaten down, overburdened, and wondering where hope may find a way in. People all over the world are having to face up to the choices that they make, whether for life, or for something else. How would you choose? To feed a hungry child; or a money-earning parent who keeps the family going? To go with chemotherapy when the prognosis is not good, and all that goes with that; or to choose to soldier on and let nature take her course? To choose a well-paid job that gets you easy money, but you have to silence your conscience and principles; or to

take lesser paid employment but maintain your dignity. To adhere to marriage vows that tell you that it is, 'until death do you part'; or to realise that an abusive relationship because of infidelity or physical or psychological violence is no relationship at all. To say nothing in a difficult family or work situation because you know it will make things even more challenging by being less than honest in what you say or do; or putting your money where your mouth is and saying out loud exactly how things are in a situation, and then living with the difficult consequences.

We all face them. We all make choices and decisions and set priorities for the short and the long term. How do you choose? How have your choices and decisions affected and shaped your life, and maybe the lives of others. Did you choose life?

In our Old Testament reading this morning, Moses is coming towards the end of his life and is addressing the children of Israel who he has led for many years from slavery into the wilderness and now, at last, on the brink of reaching the Promised Land. Looking back, looking forward, God through Moses demands that the people make a choice, not just for themselves, but for their living, their reason for being, their hope for the future, the goals and priorities that shape them.

"Choose life." Choose to be with God, choose to follow God, and choose to accept the responsibilities that go with those choices. Or accept that there are consequences if you choose another way.

In the modern world we don't like these kinds of pronouncements. We think, "Nobody, not even God, is going to tell me what I can and can't do!" But the reality is that there are many times in life when we are not so independent, and where God, not a Divine dictator, is offering us a choice.

A choice with responsibilities

Do we give to aid charities, and by give I don't mean just some loose change, but a substantial amount which might entail some sacrifice on your part? On the Christian Aid website for the

earthquake appeal, but it's likely the same in others, they lay out some choices. £30 could provide support and vital supplies to people sheltering homeless in harsh winter storms. £50 could help local partners and communities to build shelters. £109 could help local partners to remove debris and organise rescue efforts.

Do we give to this Church, knowing that lockdown continues to have an impact on our rental income, and we face a challenging deficit. Where our giving supports not only heating and lighting and keeping the building wind and water tight, but paying for staff who keep the building open and welcoming; paying for the music we enjoy; and the children's ministry that needs support; and the Morningside Hope project that is helping change the lives of people with dementia; even paying an appropriate amount for coffee and biscuits after the service.

"Choose life." Choose God, Who has chosen you.

It's not just about money. It's about how we spend our time and use the talents God has given us. That expenditure in the economy of God is considerable. I spoke to a new minister last week in the first months of ministry, confronted by the cry of her child, "But mummy, you're always working." God's work, pastoral work, preaching work, listening work, that's a good choice. But up against the needs of a child who simply wants to be noticed and played alongside. And it's not just ministers facing that kind of dilemma and choice. How do you choose? It's not easy.

"Choose life." Choose God, Who has chosen you.

Or the good people who make serious commitments in faith about being part of the church community and playing their part; and then work creeps in, or the ballet and rugby classes for their children; or the important golf match; or the round of visiting relatives that matters. Or the need to catch up with laundry, cleaning, shopping, reading, how 'Happy Valley' ended, or 'Call the Midwife'. And emails, emails, emails.

"Choose life." Choose God, Who has chosen you.

Moses and the children of Israel weren't faced with any of these modern conundra. They had choices about physical survival, about fleeing slavery, about searching for a land of promise, about staying true to God despite temptations to go elsewhere.

But it was all still about choosing life. About choosing the God Who had chosen them. The Old Testament talks about staying true to God and this has cropped up ever since. It did for the Corinthian Christians in Paul's time in the C1st AD: which of the three Christian leaders was the most authentic, the most cultured, the most inspiring, the most faithful? Peter or Paul, or Apollos?

"Choose life", realising that they all played a part in building up God's world of faith.

The Old Testament idea about staying true to God crops up today. Your choices define you, mould you, shape you, restrict you, elevate you, transform you.

"Choose life." Choose God, Who has chosen you. Choosing, with God, to be your best self that not only helps you in your living but helps the living of the people around you. Who may be inspired, or disappointed, by how you behave.

Why choose God when you could choose anything else you want? I wonder might it be that if we do that we violate the kindness and compassion, the fairness and justice, the tolerance and inclusion that God wants for the world, and there will be hell to pay for the wrong choices we make.

I want to say to you today that what God is offering here in these choices is *not* bullying yu into submission, or divinely twisting your arm so that you comply. Rather God lays before you the consequences of the choices you make, and the responsibilities that are the privilege of the choices you are offered.

God wants us to know that God has already chosen us to be God's people, God's beloved, God's presence in God's world. Now of course, not all misfortune is connected with God's judgement. Nor is every material blessing a by-product of our faith. It is not that simplistic. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. But the moral arc of the universe does bend toward justice, and I would claim that that is God's doing, when it comes to the choices we make.

The flip side of any wrong choosing on our part is what God offers: community, blessing, life, hope, love. Working out what the right choice is going to be means blessing for the entire community, not just some. It means a home not just for God's people but for all who seek shelter. It means economic policies that shares enough with everyone. It means a fair sharing of resources, and a generous giving of kindness with compassion.

For the wandering, landless Israelites, it meant a place to call their home.

And for us? What does choosing life look like for us this morning? A kindly and generous disposition? A welcoming smile and a reassurance that things are going to turn out all right? A healing after sickness and pain? A blessed release after a time when a body slowly comes to the end of its earthly journey? A new job? A new relationship? A new sense of purpose? A new sense of belonging? An acceptance of forgiveness? A new sense of hope?

Maybe Moses, all those millennia ago, was on to something. "Today I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life." Choose God, Who has chosen you.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**