

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 13 WEEK 21 YEAR B 26 AUGUST 2018

Life is full of decisions to make. Some of them are minor decisions. What should I wear today? What shall we have for tea? Others are much more important. A young person needs to decide what to study, what to be trained for, and what interests to develop. Then there are decisions about what sort of job to do, and where to live. Then there are decisions about the close relationships we may have during life. Is somebody the right person to be my life partner? Are we ready to have a family? As a rough rule of thumb, the more important a decision is, the more we're in it for the long haul. You could put that statement the other way round: if a decision has long term implications, we must try to get it right.

There's lots more we could say. We don't make decisions in a vacuum. Other people or things outside our control may affect the decisions we make. Having made a decision we may still have to work to make it 'right' – eg moving house means we must be prepared to get involved in a new community. We have to acknowledge that sometimes things go wrong, even if the decision seemed right at the time. Sometimes the questions 'What is right?' and 'What do I want?' have different answers.

In today's first reading Joshua is addressing the Israelites who had been led by Moses from Egypt and were now settling in the promised land of Canaan. Some of them might have been born during the forty year journey. He asks them to decide whom they will serve: the LORD God who delivered them from Egypt, or the various other gods whose worship they had encountered. There were the gods in Egypt, gods of the nations through which they had travelled, and gods of the people of Canaan where they were settling. Joshua says that he and his household will serve the LORD. The people make the same promise. It is a solemn declaration of intent for how they are going to live in the country to which the LORD has guided them. Subsequent history would show how far they succeeded and how much they failed to keep their promises.

In today's gospel Jesus asks the twelve if they are going to leave him. Others who have been following him, a wider group of disciples, have left because they find his teaching difficult. In particular it is his teaching about the eucharist which they cannot accept, about eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood. We saw in the last two weeks how revolutionary Jesus' teaching was. He called people to base their lives on him rather than on observing the law; they were to worship in the eucharist founded on his death and resurrection rather than worship by offering animal sacrifices in the temple. This was too much for many: they did not want to change.

They might, sincerely, have felt he was wrong. But Peter speaks for the twelve and others who decide to stay with Jesus. Whatever they want, however they feel, they have realised that Jesus has the words of eternal life. To whom else can they go?

Jesus regularly points people beyond this world towards God's world. He uses words like 'living' or 'true' or 'from above' to describe God's world, the world of eternal reality. "I am the living bread." "I am the true vine." "You must be born from above." The words 'flesh' and 'spirit' describe the two worlds. Earlier in John's gospel Jesus has told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, only those who are born of water and the Spirit can enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." There's an almost identical statement in today's gospel: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless."

This leads naturally to S. Paul's description in our New Testament reading of spiritual warfare. "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." S. Paul tells his hearers to put on the whole armour of God. He's drawing on a picture in the prophet Isaiah about the LORD seeing there was no human being who could save Israel from the state it was in, so the LORD himself 'put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.' The LORD himself would fight for his people. S. Paul extends the list of armour and weapons – I'm sure it could be turned into a video game – but the point is that we're not fighting in our own strength. God gives us his righteousness, truth and peace, supplies us with his word and spirit, in the battle of our own lives with evil.

There are various ways in which we have made our decisions to follow Christ. Some of us have come into faith gradually; others can point to significant events along the way. Some of us may still have to make that decision. It is life-changing, but it needs constant renewing: the struggle with evil goes on, the growth in holiness continues. It is life-giving because we are formed into God's people, set free from the gods of this world and the powers of evil. They no longer control our lives because, with S. Peter, we hail Christ as the Holy One of God.