

4th bef Lent '11
Twente/Arnhem

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

Life's Choices Big and Small

I can't remember where I heard it, but there's a story about a man who desperately needed a holiday. He went to the travel agency to find out about any possible last minute deals, explaining he was under a lot of stress and needed a break. The kind lady travel agent, out of sympathetic curiosity, asked what he did for a living.

'Well,' the man replied, 'I work in the agricultural industry. When harvest time comes, I sit in a big, comfortable chair, under a shady parasol, and an attendant fans away the flies other insects. Field workers bring me the fruit they pick, and it is my job to sit there and select which fruit goes in basket A (for Grade A, top-class fruit) and which fruit goes in basket B (for Grade B, lower quality fruit).'

The travel agent had to ask, 'Sir, why is your job so stressful?'

The man replied: 'All those tough decisions!'

Life is full of decisions: big and small, significant and trivial. I suppose one of the challenges that calls for wisdom is to know the difference between what is big or small, significant or trivial.

Years ago, Steven Covey published a minor classic in management training: *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1990)*. In it, Covey suggests that to learn how best to manage our time and make good decisions, we need to learn to distinguish between what is *important* and what is *unimportant*, and also between what is *urgent* and what is *non-urgent*.

It may be perfectly obvious when something is both important and urgent. Like the need to administer CPR to a person having a heart-attack. It may *also* be obvious when something is both neither urgent nor important. Like how we deal with a lot of modern advertising, which urges: 'Buy this now, it's a must have!' Most of us learn that can or ought to be ignored.

But wisdom is in knowing what is important, but apparently not urgent, on the one hand, and knowing what claims to be urgent but is actually not that important, on the other hand. We are daily faced with things that are less important, but claim to be urgent. We would be wise to be careful how, or even if, we respond to these situations. Unfortunately, things that are urgent and unimportant never want to be put on hold!

In the 1st 5 chapters of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus engages in a flurry of intense, rapid-fire ministerial action. Even so, after each miracle of healing or session of teaching, Jesus retreats for a time of prayer, or fasting, or solitary reflection. He may have been tempted to engage in non-stop, 24/7 ministry, to please the crowds. But that would have been unfaithful.

He showed how much more important it was for a servant of God to seek to connect, every day, even several times a day, to the source of all power, wisdom and inspiration. Yet prayer or quiet time are usually the first things to be dropped when we are surrounded by the apparent urgencies of daily life.

Perhaps it was because Jesus understood best of all the nature of His Heavenly Father's Kingdom, that he kept things on earth in perspective. Jesus knew that building God's Kingdom was top priority, but that it involved a combination of our human cooperation and God's will. It is not our Kingdom but God's, that is being built, and that is more important than all the mere human things we might regard as urgent. Jesus kept this in perspective.

Because he had a Kingdom perspective, St Paul could write to his friends in Corinth that he was not really bothered which apostle got credit in Corinth. Paul wrote, ⁷'So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.' In the Kingdom perspective, it

doesn't matter which colleague gets credit, as long as God ultimately does, and as long as His Kingdom comes.

To Moses, the people of Israel were presented with what could only be described as a dramatic, important and urgent choice: between a way of life that leads to life or a way of life that leads to death. The Lord, using Moses as a mouth-piece, declares the options:

30:¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Think about it. Some decisions we make in life are huge ones, life-shaping ones, even if we don't always see it at the time.

The choice of whom we marry: that affects everything that happens thereafter. Young couples, basking in the joys of romantic love, may not want to stop and reflect on the big picture. But that is the role of wise friends, counselors and ministers. I usually explain to couples that when we meet we're trying to do both wedding preparation (for the ceremony) AND marriage preparation (for life together).

The choice of what we will study, what we will do for a living (one's vocation), where we will live. All of these are decisions that have huge ramifications for other aspects of our lives.

Which is why choosing to seek and follow God is, I feel, the most fundamental decision of all. If we do, we will *not* then have all other situations and decisions easily sorted out, by any means. But we will be able to put them all in perspective, to commit them to God in prayer, and to learn his loving wisdom about all things. And that makes all the difference.

The way of Christ, is not the easy way, in a sense. Jesus reminds his disciples (in the verse just before our Gospel reading today, that ended our reading last Sunday), that 'unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will *never* enter the kingdom of heaven.' (5:²⁰)

Christ's way to God is *not* less demanding than Phariseeism or other human-powered forms of religion and ethics. The standards Christ sets are far *higher* than even the great Law of Moses:
Not just no murder, but no anger!;
Not just extremely limited divorce, but no adulterous lust!;
Not just no swearing falsely or perjury, but no white lies and no stepping back from your stated commitments at all!

Christ sets the standards of ethics and spirituality so high as to be humanly impossible. Which is the point: he wants us to *quit* relying on our own power and rely *more* on God, just like he does. *That* is the way to the Kingdom: after all, all that is impossible for us, is dead easy with God. Or should I say, 'life easy.' Jesus way seems hard, but he insists that if we understand him rightly, his yoke is *easy*, his burden is *light*. But the one thing he cannot do for us is make the choice for us between lively living or the depressing and deadly way. That is for us. But with Moses, Jesus and Paul: Choose life!