

Sunday 7 September – Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk))

Choose life

How good are you at making choices? Are you someone who picks up the restaurant menu and knows straight away what you want to eat or do you need to contemplate the range of options for twenty minutes before you can order? Do you go to the shops, see something you like and buy it, or do you need to go to fifteen other shops first, before going back to buy the thing you saw in the first shop you visited? Some choices are much easier to make than others, not least because some choices have far greater consequences than others. The choice Moses puts to the people of Israel in today's reading from the Old Testament is a big choice – about the way that they are to live and the values they will live by – but it is surely a no brainer: choose life or choose death.

Moses and the people of Israel have been wandering about in the wilderness for forty years and are now on the brink of entering the land that God has promised to give to them. These are not the same people who had fled from the Egyptians and crossed the Red Sea. Many of the adults who had been slaves in Egypt would have died by this time. The children who had been carried out of Egypt would now be grandparents. Their collective memory would be of being homeless nomads in an unhospitable wasteland. Only people over the age of fifty would have any real memory of what it had been like to live as slaves in Egypt.

They are also not the same people because of the experiences they have been through. They had known hunger, thirst, sickness and despair. There had been days when they had known that God was present among them and they had followed the visible symbols of the pillars of cloud and fire across the wilderness. There had been other times when God had felt so distant that they had given up altogether and had made themselves a golden calf to worship as their god. Sometimes they had trusted Moses' leadership and listened to what he had to say. At other times they had railed against both him and the God on whose behalf he claimed to speak. They had learnt much about themselves and about what it might mean to

be called God's chosen people. It certainly didn't mean life was always going to be easy.

Now they are close to crossing the Jordan and reaching their destination with the hope of at last having a land they can call their own. By this time, Moses is a very old man and he already knows, because God has told him, that he will not live to see the promised land, just as many others who had left Egypt had not done so. He gathers the people together to preach his final sermon to them.

Moses sets out very starkly the choice that the people have to make. They can choose life or death, prosperity or adversity, blessing or curse. If they obey the commandments given to them by God, then life and prosperity will be theirs. But if they turn away from God's commandments and worship other, false gods, then they are warned that they will not live long and will not enjoy the benefits of the land they are about to enter.

Moses implores them to choose life, and that should be the obvious choice. The commandments God has given them are not all that onerous and are about maintaining a right relationship with God (worshipping God alone, keeping a sabbath day) and living well together in community (not committing murder, theft or slander). What they have to gain is enormous: God's on-going presence, blessing and the promise of long lives in a fruitful place. Why would they not choose that?

Well, because human nature hasn't changed much since the thirteenth century BC. Greed, selfishness and the desire to exercise power over others influenced human choices as much then as they do now. Why stick to the rules of a God who says you shouldn't exploit others when there is money to be made from doing so? Why not set up gods of your own and encourage people to worship them if that means you get to control the agenda? Why not murder and steal if you think you won't get caught or if your thugs are strong enough to make sure you don't have to face the consequences?

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of the failure of God's people to choose life. The trouble is, you can't just choose life for yourself. If you are following the way of God, you have to choose life for everyone. Life and prosperity for the people of God also has to mean life and prosperity for the foreigners living in their midst. Life and prosperity for the leaders has to

mean life and prosperity for widows and orphans. Otherwise it isn't God's way of life and it is the path that leads to death.

We see the same choice laid out in some of the politics of division in our own day. Some would have you believe that you can only choose life for yourself and your family if you deny it to foreigners and vulnerable people. They will tell you that your rights are being undermined by the rights of immigrants, trans people and people living on benefits. They will tell you that the country can only prosper if prosperity is denied to some groups of people. Choose life, says Moses, but it has to be life for everyone, otherwise it is death. Obeying the commandments of God means protecting the vulnerable, providing for those who have no means to provide for themselves, welcoming the stranger, offering a place of sanctuary. If we do not choose life for everyone, we have not really chosen life at all.

Moses goes on, in his last sermon, to tell the people of Israel that he knows he will not cross over the Jordan himself. He commissions Joshua to take his place as leader. He then hands out a written copy of the laws given to him by God and tells them to make sure they read it regularly. He praises God, blesses the people and then he dies. They give him a nice funeral, they spend thirty days mourning for him and then Joshua tells them to pack up and prepare to cross the Jordan.

Now I am aware that today, this is also a last sermon, but things are the other way around. I am the one who is going to cross the river – the Severn in my case – and you are all staying here. None of us yet knows who the next leader is going to be, though I can confidently leave you in the care of the Ministry Team. I haven't written a book of rules, you'll be glad to know, but I have left a lot of pieces of paper and emails in the care of various people.

And I say to you the same thing Moses said to the people of Israel: choose life. Most of us are creatures of habit and we don't particularly like change, especially when the change is imposed by someone else's decisions. I know a vacancy can be a difficult time for a worshipping community. I have been through them myself more than once both as a member of a church congregation and as a curate in training. Some churches lose their way in a vacancy. They fall out with one another and get tired and grumpy. But other churches flourish in a vacancy. They make clear decisions about what they

have the resources to do and what will have to wait. They discover gifts they didn't know they had in their midst. They work together, support one another and keep growing together. Most importantly, they pray.

It can feel hard when someone else is being called to something new and you are the ones being left behind. But God's call is to you just as much as it is to me. God remains here with you just as much as God goes with me. God will continue to work in and through you as you await the appointment of your next Team Rector. It is up to you to choose life for the duration of the vacancy and beyond. Choosing life will mean continuing to listen together for the voice of God, welcoming the stranger, caring for the vulnerable, supporting one another and, eventually, welcoming a new minister just as the people of Israel welcomed Joshua's ministry among them.

Moses urged them to choose life. Here's something else he said to them – you'll find it in Deuteronomy 31: "Be strong and bold. Have no fear or dread... because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you." God is calling you on to the next stage of your life together as a worshipping community. God is faithful and will be with you, whatever the next few months may bring. What God asks of you is what God always asks of each of us: that we love the Lord our God with all our hearts, our minds, our souls and our strength and that we love our neighbour as ourselves. Change is part of life and without it, we cannot grow. God remains constant and carries us through times of change.

But we have to make the choice to stick with God. We need to hold on to what we know to be true of God while at the same time being open to what God might have to show us next. We have to trust in God's promises to us while remembering that God makes promises to other people too. We cannot close in on ourselves and stop looking outwards – we must always be asking how God calls us to take what we have as a community and share it with others. We have to choose life and we can do so with confidence, knowing that Jesus came that we might have life in all its fullness.

Jesus' last sermon wasn't bad either. As he stood on the mount with his closest disciples, he commissioned them to go and teach people to obey God's commandments, just as Moses had done, and he reminded them that he would go with them: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." They would discover just what that looked like ten days later

when the Holy Spirit sent them out into the streets praising God and preaching powerful sermons of their own. They chose life.

So go out from today, choosing life, knowing that God is with you, thankful for what has been and hopeful for what is to come. And the Lord your God will be with you.