

Worship 15 November 2020

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Introduction & Call to Worship

Welcome to worship on this Sunday when we will reflect on the choices we have and especially on the one choice that is so important for us as people of faith. “We are all human beings with the capacity to make choices, and those choices have consequences” is a sentence I picked up this week in a comment on an election we witnessed recently in which the choice was very stark and consequential indeed. And we, in the UK, have arrived at the critical moment that we will have to live with the consequences of a choice which was made four years ago. Yes, our choices have consequences and perhaps the one choice, whom or what we serve, as we hear in the Bible reading today, is what ultimately really matters. What is our response faced with the choice to serve God or to serve other gods?

Let us open our eyes to God’s presence. Let us open our ears to God’s call.
Let us open our hearts to God’s love. Let us worship....

Hymn God is love, let heaven adore him

Opening Prayer

Holy and loving God, whose spirit searches and fills all creation, you know who we are and what we long to be. You know what we hide and what is hidden from us. Come to us, in our homes and hearts, that we may meet you. And as we meet you, that we may be touched, healed, restored and renewed. That we may be filled with hope and peace, wisdom and understanding in our hearts and minds, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

O God of Israel, God of Jesus Christ, God of many names who has chosen to touch our lives with your love....We can only marvel at your choice to make your love known in Jesus Christ who lived among us, as one of us. Yet we confess that we have sometimes difficulty in our decision-making, in our choosing to serve you wholeheartedly or not. We are often tempted to put other than you first in our lives, when we are faced with choices which affect how we live as your faithful people.....choices about how we share the gifts you have given us. Forgive us when the choices we make reflect not your glory but our own selfishness. Forgive us when the choices we make revolve around our judging and condemning others without first

listening to their stories. Forgive us when the choices we make contribute to our own prosperity and wellbeing while ignoring the needs of others. Forgive us when the choices we make diminish our awareness of you, O God, in the midst of those who suffer. Gracious God, strengthen us when we are weak, with the renewing power of your Spirit. Help us to make choices which clearly reveal our identity as your faithful people and sincere followers of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

Scripture Readings Joshua 24: 14-25 & Matthew 25: 1-13

Hymn Give me oil in my lamp

Reflection

Never before have we been so much spoilt for choice in our daily lives as today. Go to any supermarket or department store or online shop and we are faced with such an amazing wide choice of foodstuffs and items that it can be quite a bewildering experience. At home, and perhaps more so during lockdown, we may relax in front of a screen and again we are faced with a choice: what programme or what film to look at...what news to follow or what amusement to distract us. Dinner time and we can choose to prepare a meal that is typically English, Scottish, Indian, French, Italian, Thai or a fusion of all....You name it and the ingredients are widely available and cookbooks and cooking programmes galore to lend us a hand. Well, I think the point is made. We are continuously faced with choices and there is no lack of them. So much so that old Screwtape, C.S Lewis’ devil, may well be rubbing his hands gleefully saying: “Now this is an achievement. They’re busy all the time making choices about things that don’t matter. We’ve got them now. They’re terminally distracted” Yes, we are distracted...distracted from facing some of the real important choices in life. For important choices have to be made. And some of these choices are life or death choices. And if we get these wrong, the consequences are far reaching. So far reaching that they may lead to conflict and war, destruction and loss of life, which we remembered last Sunday. And we recognize that all political choices have far reaching consequences however much politicians may try to brush them aside and offer us a simplistic picture of a bright future. Yes, choices have to be made. Everyday choices of less consequence, and very important choices of great magnitude.....“Choose this day whom you

will serve” Joshua tells the people of Israel gathered at Shechem. This event at Shechem is part of the covenant history of God and the people of Israel. God has promised not to abandon his people. God has chosen to remain faithful to them. Now it is the turn of the people of Israel to make their choice. Now is the time for them to reaffirm their relationship with God.

“Choose this day whom you will serve. Make up your minds about where the centre of your life lies, about what direction you intend for your life, about what loyalties lay claim on your life. Everything is at stake in this choice” And so Joshua calls Israel to decide what is true, what is ultimate, what really matters. And, at the same time, to reject what is not true, what is not ultimate, what is not important. “Decide what God you will serve...and get rid of the other gods” Now this is a really important choice to make. “Choose this day what God you will serve.....” Perhaps we do not reckon enough with this choice. Perhaps we do not insist enough that there is something really important at stake as we are faced, daily, with the choice whom we will serve. What we decide really matters. It matters because there are many gods (with a lowercase g) that are clamouring for our adoration and allegiance. The gods of selfishness, greed, aggression, power, nationalism, etc.....It really matters whom we decide, each day, to serve!

Of course, we do not know fully how well we will serve the One whom we chose to serve. But a choice has to be made. No sooner have the people of Israel assured Joshua that “they will serve” the Lord then Joshua answers, “But you may not be able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God.....” Now that is an interesting statement; not very encouraging for the people who have just decided to serve God! However Joshua may want to make it clear that the stakes are high, that the commitment to serve God should not be entered into lightly, that it means to be daily conscious of the choice that is set before us as well as recognizing that it will need commitment and perseverance. Matthew’s word to the faithful who were waiting for the return of Jesus Christ has much in common with the call of Joshua “to choose this day” As the promised return of Christ did not occur and as the delay seemed longer and longer, commitment and enthusiasm among the faithful must have burned low. “Was this choice we made as significant as we once thought? What exactly was the decision we once made?” Ten bridesmaids awaited the coming of the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, five of them were wise. The bridegroom is late and five of the ten bridesmaids have run out of oil. Does this oil shortage suggest the plight of

those whose short-lived enthusiasm gave way to disillusion, distraction and lack of commitment at the time that Matthew wrote his gospel? And what about the oil in our lamps? Do we have enough to keep our lamps burning and are we ready to respond decisively, every day, to the one choice that really matters, instead of being distracted by the thousands of other trivial choices that are presented to us in our day to day lives? Yes, let us make sure that we have oil in our lamps, so that we are ready each day to choose what really, really matters....serving God and the good news in Jesus Christ that is life-giving and life-saving. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers & Lord’s Prayer

Strengthen us in faith, O God, that we may make the right choices, choosing to serve you and to turn away from the other gods in our lives, however alluring they may be....Gracious God, we pray for those in government and in leadership, that they may serve you, and may serve the people with honesty, integrity and concern for the poor and vulnerable. May they turn to you for guidance and strength in their tasks and bring honour to the position they hold. Loving God, comforter of the sorrowing and strength of the weak, hear our prayers for all who suffer illness and distress, especially at this time while the pandemic continues to impact so heavily on the lives of so many all around the world, that whatever their needs, they may know your help and comfort and that we may stand ready to give support where we can, however we are able to.....In a moment of silence we pray.....
And as Jesus taught us we pray, OUR FATHER....

Offering

Gracious God, may our gifts declare your praise in many ways so that others will be touched by your love and care for all people. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Hymn

Guide me O thou great Jehovah

Blessing

Keep your lamps filled and your hearts open, ready for the call of God. Go in peace, counting on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**