

Pledge Day 2014 – Deut 30:11-20; Romans 12:1-8

Oliver James – the tyranny of choice (EXPLAIN)

Choice a good thing – free will fundamental to our sense of self. Think of those without it – slaves and bonded labourers.

Choices important. E.g. history often cast as ‘inevitable’ – 37 days history of start of FWW – Austro-Hungary choice whether to accept Serb surrender; Germany choice of whether to invade Belgium.

First passage – great choice God puts before his people. Who will you choose to put first: me or something else? Stark choice – life or death, prosperity or destruction. God longs that they choose him – even encourages them to do so v19 ‘choose life’ – but he never takes that choice away from them.

Why choose this passage – need to share something important. Here just over a year, settling in and seeing where things are at – **watershed moment**. Thinking and praying a lot about whether to share what I’m going to say, but a number of things have coincided in the last couple of weeks to suggest that now is the right time to say it.

In a nutshell – what Moses said to God’s people in Deut 30 is what I believe God is saying to our church St Mary’s at this moment: are we going to choose life or choose death? We have a choice to make, and the next couple of years will determine what choice we have made, but the choice is simple for us: will we choose life, or choose death?

Sounds a bit dramatic – church here for 800 years, and it has survived one way or another. And yes it has. But for most of that time the state church was very wealthy, and in fact Wavendon was a wealthy living. Its survival was guaranteed – though in fact if you speak to Peter George he’ll tell you that 100 yrs ago several hundred people in total would often attend on a Sunday, across the morning and evening services

But life has changed dramatically. The wealth and the large congregations have gone. Just because we’ve always been here doesn’t mean we always will be. Any group that thinks like this is in most danger of dying. This is a watershed: will we choose life or choose death? And what do we need to do to choose life?

Recognise reality. Put my finger on the pulse here, and word that keeps coming back to me is mourning. Odd thing to say, but St Mary's feels like a church in mourning. Lots of different ways:

- Mourning personal loss
- Mourning loss of village identity – resigned, but big change
- Mourning loss of status – primary church in team - EXPAND

Can't give appropriate time to mourning personal loss, except to acknowledge that it is real and profound. Not just personal, sense it in church as well. Sadness about present – about where we find ourselves. Not translated into hunger for a new future. Opposite: a lot of us would love things to stay as they are: village church of 40 people. Large enough to feel part of something. Small enough to know everyone.

I get that. But the truth is that staying here is not an option. Look at key stats of church and that way is the way of death. If we aim to stay as we are, then we are choosing death for us as a church. Slow and graceful death – it won't happen overnight – like an ageing swan it will happen gracefully. But it will probably happen.

It will happen financially: if run at same loss as 2014 (big bill) we have reserves for about 3 years – not including £30k for a new roof.

But more importantly it will happen in terms of our people. It already is. Checked figs – excl Christingle and Easter: ave 54 in 2005, 50 in 2009, 48 in 2011-12, 44 in 2012-13, 41 in July-Oct 2013. Brief surge as people came to take a look at new rector (60 in Lent this year) – back to 42 in Oct just gone. Take out Harvest it was 36. Barely noticeable year-on-year – but effectively 1/3 in 10 years. And (with one blip) all in one direction.

We can't stay as we are. Why we have to choose. Life or death. To do nothing, we are effectively choosing death. So the message for us is what God says to Israel. Choose life!

How? 2 simple points. **We need God.** Season of seeking God. Not just token – pleading, asking. Prayer life needs to go whoosh (engine of spiritual life). v20 – Hold fast to God, for the Lord is your life.

We need everyone. When it comes to church growing and flourishing we are usually the answer to our own prayers (eg Matthew 9 harvest field). Pray as if everything depends on God. Act as if everything depends on you.

Before I say what I'm going to say next – word to generation now in their 80s and 90s that has carried this church. You've done more than enough – given heart and soul – we are so thankful to you, and want to honour you. Ignore what I'm going to say next – two requests: will you pray for us? I tend to find God answers your prayers more than most. And will you encourage us as we step out in faith? And of course we still need you at coffee mornings, and to be here at the heart of our community life.

But for everyone else: back to Lou's sermon last week – everyone needs to get stuck in. Talked about the won't do's and want to's. Word for us – time to raise the bar. (Membership gone up recently even as Sunday attendance dropped.)

Looking at who's involved in what – lot of people only involved on Sun morning. Great that so many help on Sunday morning, we need that: but just helping on Sunday morning isn't enough any more. That's a given. This church will live or die depending on whether you are willing to offer your gifts in other ways. Takes us to other passage:

Ro 12 – summary – use your gifts. God's given you a gift – use it.

Season of giving – one key pt – I'm part-time. General feeling that when new minister arrived things would be OK – but I can't operate a model of ministry anymore where the vicar is involved in everything. I'm reliant on the people around me. If people don't take initiative it won't happen.

Sadness that have to share a minister – see it as an opportunity. Being part of a church is so much more exciting when you're actively involved. I want us all to be part of something that is going somewhere. But it can only happen if we get a lot more people giving their gifts and energies to this church community. Return to this at start of 2015 – focus.

Team going away this Sat to start to think through where are and imagine where God is calling us – do pray for us. Get involved in conversation.

Giving – final word. Of course we need that too. Financial sit not good. Clarify passage – some particularly called – but in context that everyone gives. (Like serving and showing mercy.)

My own experience that those who are most involved also give the most. Giving is a really a barometer of the state of our relationship with God. He deserves our best – and you've done great this year – 30%! Hard time in economy, so not pretending that increasing will be easy – costly. Only give what God calls you to give. But I would encourage you to examine your hearts and ask him if (a) you can make an extra gift this year to help us balance the books; (b) you can give a bit more next year. Done well this year – thank you. Needs to go ave 20% per year over this 4 year period i.e. up again next year if we're to break even by 2017.

Watershed moment – choose life or death. There is no middle ground for us now as a church – at least there won't be in a few years time. Why saying this now. Early diagnosis gives best chance of treatment. This is our moment to choose life. And to do that we need to recognise reality. We need God. And we need everyone here playing their part. There are no passengers in a church, only participants.

Choose life. Give your gifts. Get involved. And may God bless us, and lead us into an exciting new future.

Amen.