

Two Choices – SJD – 12/2/17 – Deut 30: 15-20, Matt. 5: 21-37

The people of Israel had endured 40 years of wandering through the desert but at last their goal is in sight – the ‘Promised land’. A whole generation has passed away following their denial of God and his power but now new opportunities offered as a land ‘of milk and honey’ lay open to them. As they approach this new beginning God offers then two paths – one leading to prosperity and one to destruction, one leading to life and one to death. Put like that you would expect the choice to be easy. Who would choose death and destruction over life and prosperity?

But there are strings attached. To enjoy prosperity and life necessitates walking in God’s ways and keeping his commandments – not exactly easy or even, at times, attractive. This after all was the very cause of their collective failure before – the very reason they had had to wander thru the wilderness for the past 40 years. And if they didn’t walk in God’s ways and obey his commands then the path inevitably led to destruction and death – there was no third way on offer!

But what for the Israelites was a difficult decision becomes for even more difficult when Jesus’ teaching is considered. For him the law concerned not just our external actions but also our inner desires and motivations. Unrighteous anger, lust and even foolish promises are also judged by God as failings and worthy of judgment under the Law. Now we know from our own national legal institutions that secular law is there both to protect and act as a deterrence. It is there to uphold basic standards as well as protect individuals from exploitation and worse. God’s Law seeks to do the same – upholding his perfect standards while acting as a deterrent to our sinful natures. However the Law will never totally prevent crime nor will God’s law totally prevent us from breaking it. For this reason the people entering the ‘Promised land, - didn’t really have a choice. There was an inevitability about their actions which meant that sooner or later they would turn from God and his standards with the legal consequences. Any mental logic of serving God would be overcome by an emotional longing for some short term gain. The same is also true for us today. No matter how pious or religious we may be there is an inevitability about our denial of God. We may not do this directly but we do this every time we turn from his standards – every time we allow even those inner desires to draw us away from him.

So is God being unfair, unjust when offering the people the option of two ways? He would be if that were all He were offering – if that were all He said on the matter – but of course it wasn’t. Throughout the OT we have another message paralleling that which we heard. It is that of deliverance by God. In a physical sense the people approaching the ‘Promised Land’ knew of this deliverance - deliverance from captivity in Egypt – deliverance from a life of slavery. But there are hints too that it is be extended from the physical into the spiritual world. Moses had been brought up in the courts of Pharaoh but identified with the Hebrew slaves. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (possibly Apollos) wrote this: ***‘He (Moses) chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.’***¹ This identification with an enslaved people and their ultimate deliverance hints at the one to come who would also identify with a (spiritually) enslaved people and would again be the means of their deliverance – by giving his life on a Cross for their sins.

¹ Hebrews 11:25

Then there is the whole picture of the Passover. Blood of a sacrificed lamb placed on the doorposts enabled the Hebrews to be protected from the last of the 10 great plagues – that of the death of the first born. This too hints at something to come. As Paul himself writes, '**Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.**'² Deliverance arrives through a willing sacrifice – Jesus himself.

So, although the choices offered the Hebrews are flawed, God has in place a solution to achieve the goal of life and prosperity. God makes good what the apparent choices cannot offer. So the choice of life offered to the Hebrews is real because of what God will do for them in the future thru Jesus Christ. At the heart of the offer of life and prosperity is the gift of grace. God makes possible what we cannot hope to succeed in ourselves. The Hebrew nation discovered repeatedly that after they turned back to God each time they received through grace both forgiveness and restoration. Life and prosperity was possible – not because of their own unflinching commitment to God but because of God's unflinching commitment to them.

But what of us. When thinking of choices we are perhaps reminded of Jesus' own words about such decision making. They are no less stark. He speaks of 2 masters we can serve³, and two gates we can pass through⁴, one leading to destruction and one to life. This all sounds very similar to the offer made to the Hebrews as they entered the 'Promised land' with similar promises of hope or despair.

So let us think of the decisions we are taking. The ultimate decisions of life and death but also the growth decisions. Lent is fast approaching. Perhaps we can use that time to help clarify where we stand before God and perhaps how our relationship with him is developing. May we all be helped to make the right decisions that we too may one day enter the 'Promised Land' – to live with Jesus Christ forever.

² 1 Corinthians 5:7

³ Matthew 6:24

⁴ Matthew 7: 13-14