



Sermon preached by Revd Janet Sutton on 12th February 2023

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-30

It's complicated!

Have you ever heard that phrase? These days I see it most commonly on the Facebook relationship status. I'm not always sure what it means, but often I have my suspicions. I'll leave it to your imagination what might be going on in the lives of those you know whose Facebook status is 'It's complicated'.

The place I have heard this phrase used most recently is in the BBC drama Happy Valley. And in fact it pops up again and again. For those of you who aren't familiar with it, Happy Valley is a series set in the Hebden Bridge and Halifax area of Yorkshire. It stars Sarah Lancashire as Police Sergeant Catherine Cawood and James Norton as her nemesis, Tommy Lee Royce. Tommy is the father of Catherine's Grandson Ryan, the result of a brief abusive relationship between Tommy and Catherine's daughter Becky, who died shortly after Ryan was born. At the beginning of episode one Royce, who is a thoroughly unsavoury character, is released from prison.

The main storyline, which features the abduction of a young woman, is fraught with twists and turns, set as it is against a background of rural deprivation.

Time and time again, desperation and despair lead people to make uncharacteristic, sometimes very foolish, decisions which, far from bringing them life, have a huge negative impact, not only on those immediately involved, but also on their families, friends, and often unwitting victims who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In short, as viewers, we watch as a variety of characters make choices that will lead them into life - or down a path of death and destruction of their very own making.

It might just be that I happened to watch Happy Valley at the same time I have been reflecting on today's readings, but it seems to me that there are distinct parallels between the decision making processes made by the tv characters and those to whom our readings for today are addressed. Because both of our Bible readings are all about choices; the motivations behind them and the processes by which they are made.

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today" states the Deuteronomist, "that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live."

And what does that mean in practice? First and foremost it means putting God first; and from that base living in right relationship with others. Jesus, meanwhile, in this part of his sermon takes some real-life examples to illustrate what he has been saying previously about being salt of the earth and light to the world.

In our reading for this week Jesus takes four real-life examples of how one might do this: reconciling with others after a disagreement, 'coming to terms' or arranging to pay back bad debts, being faithful in marriage, and not using bad language or swearing under any circumstances. The level of weight with which you treat each of these examples is for you, as the listener, to decide. But I think it is fair to say that all of them deal with how one reacts to, and acts on, situations which might be described as 'complicated.'

As we have already seen, making choices is not always black and white. Life throws up all sorts of situations where the first and most obvious choice is not always the wisest way forward. And both the author of Deuteronomy and Jesus himself are very clear; that living in right relationship with God involves not just paying lip service to the rules written in the Pentateuch. In fact God demands that

we recalibrate our decision-making process to be more just, more reconciling, more loving - and yes - more godly.

Of course you should not murder, says Jesus, but there is more to it than this. Choosing life requires you to live in right relationship with others, not simply to NOT kill them. Making oneself right with God requires first reconciling with others; or there is simply no point.

'Coming to terms' is about how one relates to a person calling in a debt. Do not protest that they are being unreasonable, says Jesus. Communicate with them in advance of any formal process, or you may come off worse, even be thrown into prison until the debt is paid.

Adultery, says Jesus, is not just about having affairs. It is about how you treat your other half. God requires that you are faithful to them in thought and word as well as deed.

And finally, you shall not swear falsely. But why swear at all? Jesus asks. You do not need to, and swearing makes no difference anyway. Simply say yes or no when asked a question.

These are all real-life situations in which people find themselves. Friendships go awry, people get into debt, relationships go wrong, and who, other than my Mum, whose only swear word was 'botheration' hasn't muttered a curse under their breath at one point or other? You see, It's Complicated! Or is it?

At the beginning of season 2, episode 4 of Happy Valley a very drunk young woman throws up in the street then has a conversation with Sergeant Cawood.

"Do you know what I think God is?" she says. "I think God is like this collective goodness that's in all of us. And someone like you, it's like you're so much of this goodness, this bigness; it's like you embody what God is."

Lines like that can just be taken as drunken meanderings, but I also think it is true that screenwriters make some of their most profound observations during such exchanges. We viewers have no idea whether either character has a faith - even though Sergeant Cawood spends much of her time at her local churchyard in front of a grave with the epitaph "In God is my hope". If you have watched Happy Valley you will probably understand me when I say this hard talking, sarcastic, rough-round-the-edges policewoman doesn't immediately strike the viewer as the embodiment of God. And yet, as we learn more about her and see her in action I get what the young woman means. Because ultimately, whatever situation she is faced with, however difficult it is, how impossible it seems, she always chooses to do what is right. And ultimately her decisions bring life to herself, to those around her and to her community. What can be more godly than that?

So what can each of us take from this, other than perhaps a slight desire to watch an acclaimed BBC drama on iPlayer?

Well, I think perhaps it's a challenge - to consider our lives as they are - as they really are, not what we'd like them to be or as others think they might be - and ask ourselves, "do the choices I am currently making bring life - to myself, to those around me, to my community?" Do people with whom we relate think of us as salt of the earth or the light on the hill that Jesus spoke about previously, or are we about to take a path that will ultimately do us no good at all?

Remember that we have been given tools to help us with our decision-making: scripture, prayer and discernment and wise people around us, who can help us with our deliberations.

I would like to invite you, in a brief moment of silence, to consider your heart, and the choices with which you are currently confronted; or perhaps one big decision you are trying to make. How will you decide? What resources will you need? What might you do?

Let us be still ...

Janet Sutton
12th February, 2023