



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2022**  
**Readings: Deuteronomy 30.15-20; Luke 14.25-33**

Text: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." *Deuteronomy 30.19*

Life can seem quite challenging, even a bit overwhelming.

- As school term starts up, I wonder how it feels to cross the threshold into the Primary School after some years in Nursery?
- As we commence A-levels, how does the transition to analysis and critical thinking from the relative ease of GCSEs feel?
- As we move into a world of work where there are new and increasing responsibilities, and possibly with the gradual requirement of personal initiative, management, or trusteeship.
- What about the mixed duties and delights of parenthood? They, too, can seem onerous even when they are also fulfilling.
- And for some of us, if not all, those rising utility bills do not seem within our control. They come as such immediate symbols of so much else that is challenging about life in today's world.

And then there is the Christian life – being a disciple of Jesus. That's pretty demanding, too. When Luke tries to sum up Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel, he is not going for the 'soft sell' approach. He's right in there with strong stuff. Typical of many of a rabbinic teacher at that time, he uses exaggerated language to startle us into understanding how following Jesus is not an easy option. Although I really don't think he means we need to hate our families, if we are to love God – after all that would be something of a contradiction - I do recognise that this hyperbole makes us sit up and think about how we will answer the dying and undying love of God in Christ with a followership that tries to take our side of the deal as seriously as God in Christ takes theirs. This passage is about our priorities.

William Barclay (1907-78) is sometimes belittled as the 'plain person's' scholar, who makes everything so accessible that he has watered it down. Indeed, although I find them to be overflowing with valuable information and insight, his books really *are* easy reads. But actually, fifty years ago, as he responded to the rapid decline in Christian discipleship across Scotland that still marches on apace today, his message was no less rigorous than the essence of what Luke has Jesus say. In his biography of William Barclay, Clive Rawlins contrasts those preachers who indulge in 'bonhomie all round' and 'jovial backscratching' with Barclay speaking at a service: 'His voice rasped out ... [in] hard core prayer, about ourselves, and our need of God. ... [Next] he read a short passage from Matthew – the Sermon on the Mount, as ever – and then he laid its challenge on the line. *This* is what Jesus expects, *this* is what we must do, *these* are our marching orders.'<sup>1</sup> At the end of his life, when his health was failing – depressed, ulcerated and rheumatic - William Barclay still stood erect for Christ: 'like a standard-bearer, battered but with his standard intact.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rawlins, Clive 1998 *William Barclay: prophet of goodwill* London: HarperCollins Religious page 201

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* page 306

Of course, neither Barclay nor Jesus is prodding us toward this active discipleship in a vacuum. Nor was the writer of Deuteronomy in our second reading. They all write from their particular context. So, six and half centuries before Jesus, the writer of Deuteronomy is urging adherence to God's commandments, recalling how Moses had given them more than half a millennium before, in a time of slavery and oppression, of deliverance and new beginning. Amid the crisis, the people are called to trust God and to choose life – and their side of the bargain is a loyalty and faithfulness to God that takes centre place in each person's priorities. Similarly, when Jesus startles us with this call to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, it's that hyperbole which wants to arrest people's attention so that they recognise the utter importance of an allegiance to God in an era when there's Roman domination, religious duplicity, and moral decline. And such is William Barclay's context, too. He has the prophet's passionate concern for the way that his generation was turning its back on God. He stresses that even his fellow ministers have a *centrifugal* approach to their faith, turned away from Jesus at the centre. With his own *centripetal* emphasis, he calls them, he calls us, back to Christ; to giving Christ the central place in our lives, as our determined answer to the ecological, economical, and political crises that seem to define today's world.<sup>3</sup>

When we do give Christ and his love the central place in our lives it enables us not only to choose life for ourselves, but also to be conduits of that life-giving love to others. In her report earlier this week, the Moderator of the World Council of Churches, Dr Agnes Abuom,<sup>4</sup> spoke of how it is the radical sharing of Christ's love that moves the world to that reconciliation and unity we so urgently need. She stressed how Christ's love will bring a radical cutting edge to our prophetic dialogue with the jaded and fractured spirit of our time. She said,

*'When today hate speech is normalized through social media networks; when xenophobia and racism are nurtured by national populisms and politics of fear; when the poor face the consequences of the climate catastrophe and exploitation driven by the lifestyles of a few who are rich, does it [not] make sense to call all Christians and churches to re-envision prophetically their apostolate, their mission, witness, and unity in relation to Christ's compassionate love?'*<sup>5</sup>

It's as if Dr Abuom is calling us to be like Moses and Jesus and Barclay – to bring the essence of what we believe about God into a critical and creative encounter with the reality of our own place and time ... until it makes a difference to who we are and what the world is. So, this choosing of life is not just to enable us to face the challenges of our personal circumstances – valuable for doing so though it is. It is also in order to affect contemporary society for the better, as we strive to live within the reign of God, where justice, peace, love, and please God, humane humanity, hold sway.

To conclude, let us be clear that none of this choosing of life for ourselves or offering of life to others is an impossible demand calling out of us resources we simply don't have and cannot get. First and finally, choosing life is the fruit of so aligning ourselves with Jesus that we are filled with and shaped by his Spirit – that grace and truth which define him. Coming to Jesus, you see, is like coming to an oasis, from which the love of God is poured into our hearts. Thus we can worship, thus we can thrive, and thus we can serve one another. In fact, thus we choose life, so that we and our descendants shall live. Paradoxically, it's a heady mix

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<sup>3</sup> Rawlins, page 306

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-moderator-in-christs-love-lies-the-key-to-our-unity>; accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2022

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* paragraph 18

of the centripetal and the centrifugal – when we are turned in towards Christ as our centre, so he compels us to be turned out towards his world as our forever beckoning mission field.

Will you come with me, then, to this table, this oasis, where, in the simplest of things, broken bread and poured out wine, we find the fulness of Christ? Remember Jesus' promise: 'those who come to me shall not hunger, those who believe in me shall never thirst'.<sup>6</sup>

But first, as A and B become members of this church, we are each enabled to renew our grateful acceptance of God's grace lavished upon us, and to respond with our discipleship. That's why we sing, not

*'Take my life, and let it be',*

but

*'Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.'*<sup>7</sup>

So be it; it's hymn 502.

N. P. Uden

4<sup>th</sup> September 2022

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<sup>6</sup> John 6.35

<sup>7</sup> Frances Havergal Ridley from the hymn *Take my life, and let it be consecrated*, at CH4 5021.1-2