

John 6.35, 41-51; 1 Kings 19.4-8; Ephesians 4.25- 5.2

9th August 2015 (10th Sunday after Trinity) partly based on a 1970's sermon given by Sydney Evans, former Dean of King's College London & Salisbury Cathedral St. Andrew's Totteridge: 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.

O God, open your Word to our hearts, and our hearts to your Word, and give us grace to receive it, to understand it, and to obey it, for the glory of Christ our Lord.

In these days of freedom of information, human & consumer rights, civil liberties, data protection, health & safety regulations, etc., it's worth remembering that one of the most important things that ever happened to us in our lives happened without our having any choice at all. To put it somewhat bluntly, a female ovum was impregnated by a male sperm and, 9 months later, you & I were born.

You may have been happy with the arrangements that you arrived into, that you were loved & cared for, but maybe not. Some of us may yet experience unresolved issues of anger or guilt about our childhood experiences, and may yet need to seek help concerning them – but my point is that our births happened without us having any choice at all. And unless we we're driven to it by a despair we are unable to resist, or the government introduces new legislation, we won't have much choice over the manner of our death either.

As an aside and whilst we're on the subject, I want to make clear our Bishop's views on the bill coming before parliament on 11th September on the subject of assisted suicide. He believes the bill lacks compassion, as do I, not so much for those keen to end their lives, but for the larger number who will feel pressurized if the bill is passed, vulnerable people who may be made to think of themselves as a burden or a financial drain. This could lead to real feelings amongst the terminally ill of passivity, depression, and even self-loathing, under increased risk of distress and coercion

at a time when they most require love and support. We are urged to contact our MP to express our concern.

Returning to my themes of belief & trust & choice, we remember that it takes more than nine months to make a person – it takes many decades. Cynics have said that the only thing we're good for should we ever get to that happy state of fully developed personhood - is death - a bitter remark expressing futility and a lack of faith in life. But what is a more typical human response to say, the tragic early death of a young person, particularly a bright, talented, promising individual with tremendous prospects? Or even a youngster with learning difficulties such as Downs syndrome? – whose condition is often counterbalanced by extraordinary gifts of unconditional love and devotion. The response is much more often a sense of gratitude for the privilege of having known persons of such quality.

You & I didn't choose to be born, but in between our birth & death we experience this mystery of being alive, of being human, of being ourselves and not someone else, of being unique. This 'uniqueness' depends partly on our genetic inheritance, partly on our emotional development, and almost more importantly, on what we do with what we've received.

Experience of other people tells us that there's an infinite variety of responses to the cards we've been dealt, from the extremes of self-centredness to self-sacrifice, and everything in between. We find ourselves living in a period of unprecedented social, technological and cultural change. There is no *status quo* to which the more timid or conservative can go back. For better or worse we are being swept along on a progressive tide of change, taking with us as never before, the power to build or to destroy.

At the present time, it can seem that we are set on a course to self-destruction from either guns or garbage. To what will we succumb, thermonuclear annihilation or an irreversibly polluted environment? In this, this life we did not choose, we find ourselves confronted by the need to choose between life and death, between policies and practices that lead to one or the other. These terms, 'life' and 'death', have passed beyond mere biological reference, they speak of things moral, cultural, or personal. We know all too well that there are many today for whom existence is already a kind of living death and very far from the fullness of joy.

But surprisingly perhaps, these difficulties we face are nothing new. The choices we face were seen to be an issue thousands of years ago when a Jewish prophet spoke these words from Deuteronomy:

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days' (Deut.30.19b-20a)

'Choose life.' A voice, calling across the ages, amidst all the confusions, relativities and contradictions of our world, that touches us to the core, summoning us to recognize what we are. Disregard this voice and I don't believe we can achieve true personhood. We are not just biological factories processing organic food and scientific data - we are beings whose identity depends on us taking responsibility for what we are and the directions in which we move.

'Choose life' is addressed to us at the centre of our potentiality – to be as fully as possible what we are capable of being – and to do this at every stage of our development and dying. As Christians concerned for our integrity we are bound to say, 'the basic and fundamental resource enabling us to be really human is God.' And that is a statement which either means nothing at all or else it means

everything. To speak of God is to speak either of an illusion or of the essential dimension of the life we live. God is not a bolt-on extra to be superimposed – he is the essential dimension in which we live and move and have our being.

To become human, God demands that we come out from behind the barriers of our defensiveness – to be set free from this need to defend myself, to justify myself, to create my own empire. Real humans are without defensiveness – they are prepared to be vulnerable, ready to suffer whatever may be the consequence of openness to serve the well-being of others. This is why I am so attracted to Christ, the 'Bread of Life.'

Jesus stands among us as the one genuinely free person, one who recognized absolutely that people are beings who have to do with God. Look at the way he related to his 'Father', the ever-loving yet demanding presence, the ever-dependable resource. Jesus chose life – he became the bread of life. In giving up his flesh and blood, he made it available for us all to participate in, every time we gather around his table.

We have a choice too, today and every day. Do we choose the world's jaded outlook of doubt, denial, devaluation, depersonalisation and dehumanisation, or do we choose Jesus' way of love and hope, putting others before himself. Christ opened up for everyone a pathway to eternal life, not just after our death, but for right now, in a glorious, growing, giving life here in the present, right here and now. Amen.

John 6.35, 41-51

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' Jesus answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

1 Kings 19.4-8

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then

he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Ephesians 4.25-5.2

Rules for the New Life

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.