

Discipleship – Bishop Paul White – Confirmation on Sunday 23 August 2009

Readings: Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; Eph 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Lord to whom else can we go? You have the words of life! (John 6:69) Both this question and this statement were exclaimed by some of Jesus' first disciples. Some other companions had just walked off, refusing to follow Jesus any more because **their** lives, and **his** teaching, were becoming too much for them. So Jesus asked the twelve, *have you had enough? Will you go too?* That is the all important question to which they replied ***Lord to whom else can we go? You alone have the words of life!***

What about you? Are you ever tempted to leave off following Jesus? Do you have times of feeling you've had enough and want to turn away? Don't feel you have to answer but let me pose some questions: Are you a child of God? Are you a saint? Are you a Christian? Are you a disciple? Some possible answers to those questions might include: 'yes' or 'no', 'I think so', 'I hope so', 'I'm not really sure', or 'I try to be'.

To help with answering those questions, and to help with the struggle it sometimes is to be a Christian, I thought it might be helpful to spend a few moments thinking about *how to relate to, how to engage with, God*. This could perhaps be paraphrased *how to live a Christian life*. The thoughts I will share with you come from today's readings.

In **Joshua** we see a Godly man nearing the finality of his life, recounting the goodness of God to him and to his people, and urging his people to choose God and serve God. This is what those confirming their faith today will be doing. In **Ephesians** we encounter another 'finality' where the writer sums up all he had written before and outlines imperatives for what to do next. In **John**, we see that telling episode with Jesus, his casual companions, and his devoted disciples.

So, what can we learn about relating to God?

Joshua, Paul and the disciples of Jesus serve as examples for us today. Joshua declared 'as for me and my household, we will serve to Lord' and invited others to 'choose this day whom you will serve' (Joshua 24.15); knowing that in life, whether by choice or by default, we will be serving someone. The disciples of Jesus I've mentioned already – ***Lord to whom else can we go? You have the words of life!*** (John 6:69). The reading from St Paul's letter to the first century Christians in Ephesus (Ephesians 6: 1-10) is instructive.

He places Christian faith and life, and the issues we deal with day by day, in the Cosmic, Spiritual and Eternal context. These are God's gifts and God's arenas and Paul urges us to be strong – not in our own strength but – in the strength of God's power; and then we will be able to stand against the spiritual forces of evil. This has implications for our actions, our integrity, our attitude to others, and our reliance on God. Let me explain.

In verses 11 and 13, we are urged to **act** in such a way as to prepare, to be disciplined, to take up what God has given – 'put on, take up, the whole armour of God'. These **actions** are decided by our will or as Joseph said – 'choose this day' – day by day.

In terms of our **integrity**, we become people of truth and righteousness through God's provision and our choice – the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness are given and received – 'fasten the belt' and 'put on the breastplate'.

In terms of our **attitudes** toward others, Paul reminds Christians that we stand and walk in the gospel of peace, and are called to be ready to proclaim it. We can be peace makers and peace bearers wherever we may be.

In terms of our **reliance upon God**, we see several points from verse 16 and following. Adding to all of the above, take the shield of faith – faith in God; take the helmet of salvation – salvation that comes from God; and take the sword of the Spirit – the word of God. These are all gifts of God to be received and appropriated by us – by choice.

All of these prepare us for prayer and here we are urged to pray for ourselves; to pray for all the saints; to pray for our leaders; and to pray for those with whom we serve God locally and with whom we minister to those around us; and to pray that the mystery of the gospel will be made known with boldness.

Joshua reminds us we have free will and the best way in life is to exercise that freedom in choosing to follow and serve God. The twelve disciples of Jesus, of whose choice to continue following Jesus through difficult and confusing circumstances, we read today, found themselves, found God, found their whole reason to be, in following Jesus and serving his mission. St Paul wrote to first century Christians ‘Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power’ and then he outlined some how to’s.

So today, what about us? If we’ve never done so, we can choose for the first time to follow Jesus. We can choose to return to him if we have wandered away. We can choose to continue following and build our ongoing relationship with him because there is always room for growth. How can you make this an act of your will – a choice of whom and how you will serve?

At the conclusion of a Confirmation service it is always my joy to provide an opportunity for people to make such a commitment. I read an invitation, and people may respond; ‘We will gladly do so, in the Strength of the Holy Spirit.’ Please turn to page 69 in the Prayer Book. As I read the invitation, please follow in the book and in a moment of silence, rather than the corporate communal response using the word ‘we’, I invite you, in the silence of your heart and mind to respond ‘I’ – ‘I will gladly do so in the strength of the Holy Spirit.’ So, I close with the invitation, then a silence in which I ask you to respond silently, personally, individually.

All who have been baptised and confirmed are called to study the Bible, to take part in the life of the Church, to share in the Holy Communion, and to pray faithfully and regularly. We are called to share with others, by word and example, the love of Christ and his gospel of reconciliation and hope. We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves, to honour all people and to pray and work for peace and justice. I invite all of you to commit yourselves anew to this calling.