

Sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on 12th February 2017
Matthew 5:21-37

CHOICES:

- choice Moses laid before Israel
- choices Jesus offered the crowds in Sermon on Mount
- good choice Psalmist made
- poor choices Christians in Corinth made
- what choices you and I have made
- Sermon on Mount could look like series of rules even harder to follow than Jewish Law - don't be angry, or fancy anyone, or divorce, or swear - hell for those who fail. BUT this misses the point. Jesus always against following minute detail of Law & missing big picture.
- Really re radical change of lifestyle / motivation - OUR CHOICES - 'rules' in Sermon on the Mount = examples of how it could look if we lived like that.
- Also re: God's grace and mercy. None of us perfect - Paul: torn wanting to do right but doing wrong - who can rescue him? God!
- **Richard Rohr - *Breathing Under Water* - dilemma > God sets high standards, that we can't keep.** But God also has endless love, compassion and mercy and WANTS us to choose and live well. We depend on this, but we also have a responsibility to CHOOSE to live his ways. Chicken & egg - which first? Our responsibility to choose, or God touching our hearts to make that choice possible for us? Our responsibility or God's grace?
- **Over centuries - still today - two extreme views:**
- RESPONSIBILITY - hellfire and damnation preaching! All focussed on own effort. Dry and miserable or harsh and merciless?
- GRACE - taken to extreme, means we make no change to underlying lifestyle.
- **Two mechanical approaches to salvation:**
- EITHER "say prayer of commitment to ask Jesus into our lives" - after that old ways are supposed to be gone - dead to sin and new creation - so can't/don't sin. I don't think so!!! Unreal. And James says if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves...
- OR all re regular confession, church services and Holy Communion. But unless radical change to whole approach, missed point - not touched heart.
- **PARADOX - we can't choose to be righteous on our own - we depend totally on God -but we must try.**
- **Old saying "No-one catches the wild ass by running after him, yet only those who run after the wild ass ever catch him".**
- We have to 'work out our salvation in fear and trembling' AND AT SAME TIME it's all God's grace - saved by faith not good efforts.
- SO WHAT? > HAVE WE MADE THE CHOICE TO LIVE LIKE THIS?
- Could go through life without, and God's mercy still there at end. BUT miss out on so much blessing in THIS life.
- Moses: I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction ... love the LORD your God, walk in obedience to him and keep his commands ... then you will live But if your heart turns away ... you will certainly be destroyed ... NOW CHOOSE LIFE...
- Ecclesiasticus: ... to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given.
- So CHOOSE LIFE.
- Different way of approaching life.

- Bialock poem: builds house by sea, at safe distance looking across sand at sea - one day sea comes - gradual but unstoppable rise - could be God or world or sorrow/suffering? Thinks of fleeing or drowning or death - instead gives self as coral castle & earns to breathe under water. Paradox - can't be under water and breathing - but somewhere inside heart says it's true.
- CHOOSE LIFE
- HOW? Rohr parallel with AA's (faith-based) 12-step programme:
 - Admit to God/self I am imperfect, sinful person - human failings
 - Admit own powerlessness to change.
 - Want to change.
 - Be willing for God to remove our defects of character.
 - Ask for God's help, and expect help/change to come (somehow!).
 - Take steps to make any amends we need to, for self or others.
 - Keep seeking after God.

NOW CHOOSE LIFE.

The words of today's Collect: Amid unruly human passions give us grace to love & desire what God commands & promises, so in changing world our hearts are fixed where true joys are to be found.