

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78
Matthew 25:1-13

So, which God is it to be?

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

So, which God is it to be?

All of life calls us into making choices — coming to decisions that mean eliminating other options. As I choose to go down this path I eliminate the possibility of following that one. In a world in which we are surrounded by possibilities choosing can become a daily chore — but always there have been the life decisions, the moment comes past which it can be too late.

The ancient people that Joshua led were faced with choices. They were living in the land among the Amorites. Each nation of people had its own collection of gods. Doubtless there were attractions in getting involved in different cults. It probably helped with diplomacy and trade — good for peaceful race relations, a shared understanding of each others' culture — all good reasons for adopting a broad spectrum when it came to religion.

But Joshua pointed out to his constituency that there was a problem. Sure, it was OK to get involved with the cults, but Joshua was to point out to the tribes that had come out of Egypt, you have to make a choice. You either serve Yahweh who rescued us from slavery or you choose the Amorite gods or the Egyptian ones our ancestors had come to know. And the choice is to be made today.

Joshua told them to put those gods away. It sounds like he was suggesting that they put them away in a cupboard as if they were things rather than deities - which is what they were - little household ornaments, family gods, idols.

You can begin to understand how difficult it must have been for the escaped slaves to change so radically their understanding of religion. They had been captive to a foreign power and were now living side by side with people whose gods were inventions of their own minds and who were the constructions of their own hands. Then Moses came along and announced that Yahweh was their God and, no, I'm sorry, I don't have so much as a photograph of him to show you. But Yahweh is different from all other gods because he is known, not in the images that might be made for veneration or in make-believe stories of the fanciful activities in the invisible places where gods live. Yahweh is known by his saving activities for his people.

Is it any wonder when they were out in the desert and Moses had climbed up Mount Sinai and he had been gone such a while that they could only assume he wasn't coming back. Moses was gone. God was gone. What were they to do? Of course they did what anyone would do under the circumstances. They made a cow so they would have something nice to worship.

It was not a straight forward choice that Joshua put before the people. ‘...choose you this day whom you shall serve...’, the family statues that can be put away in the cupboard, the things you made, or Yahweh, the God who made you and who is known, not by what he looks like but by what he does, and by what he calls us to do in his service.

It has to do with where we place our trust really — trust in the inventions of our own minds and the constructions of our own hands, or trust in the one who has made us at a word from his mind and who holds us in the hollow of his hand.

Joshua said, ‘who will you serve, as for me and my family, we will serve Yahweh.’ All the people knew how to respond. After all, this was like a political rally wasn’t it. Don’t you just go along with the man of the moment up front who is making the inspiring speeches?

But Joshua was not after a popularity vote for himself, nor lipservice for God. He wasn’t just asking a rhetorical question. Joshua said, ‘you are just saying that, you won’t be able to sustain your promise. You will slip away and get the little figures out of the cupboard again, then your faithlessness will be shown up and it will be too late.’ But the people said, ‘We’ll be good.’

Joshua was not asking a rhetorical question — not like the prison chaplain who was preaching on the parable we read from the gospel this morning. He concluded his sermon by asking, “What would you prefer, to be in the light with the bridegroom or out in the dark with the five foolish virgins?” The answer of his all male congregation was at variance with what he intended as the message for the day.

It was a great bachelor party. But about midnight some of the guys left. The rest of us stayed till 3 am. just playing cards and telling stories. The wedding the next morning was at 10. We dashed out to the car at 9:30 to get to the church in time to be ushers and groomsmen. But the car wouldn’t start. We’d left the lights on the night before. No one seemed to be around to help us. We called the church to get the other guys to come pick us up. “Sorry,” they said. “If we come to get you, we’ll all be late. It’s better that some of us be here to cover the job than have all of us over there starting your car.” Well, by the time we got there, the wedding was over.

I find this a very disturbing story. It is disturbing like Joshua’s story when he said that the people would give their service to God but they wouldn’t be able to sustain the promise and their lives would come seriously unstuck.

It is a disturbing story because it is told by the same Jesus who told us how open God’s love is, how accepting. This is the same Jesus who told the story of the workers called into the vineyard and the ones who started work late got the same pay as the ones who worked all day. The story is disturbing because there is a cut off time. Do I get a feeling that there is a cut off time to God’s graciousness? Is that why I’m disturbed? Where is the good news in this bit of the good news of Jesus Christ?

The good news is that all have been invited to the wedding. The good news is that God had brought all of his people out of slavery. The new age has begun and in God’s time his new creation will come to completion. We live in the waiting time, the time when you and I are called on to accept God’s invitation to be part of that kingdom and to participate in its new culture, which means being open to the guiding of the Spirit, of participating in Christ’s ministry of feeding the hungry, setting the oppressed free, healing the world’s brokenness. You and I are invited to participate in those Kingdom values and that is good news.

Joshua, the old cynic, he would say that we won't be able to keep the pace — we'll go back to trusting in our home made gods. Matthew reminds us that God's timing is a whole lot longer than we might have hoped and that the completeness of the Kingdom has been a long time coming, but that its coming is in God's time, not in our time. God is not waiting for us. If that were the case the time would never come when all of broken humanity and creation is healed and restored. Our hope is in God who is faithful, not in procrastinating humanity.

Choose this day and every day whom you will serve.
