

“CHOOSE FOR YOURSELVES THIS DAY ...”

Joshua 24:1-4,14-24

“*You’ve got to serve somebody*” – Bob Dylan’s much covered song, which Andrew’s just sung for us, expresses one aspect of our human condition. We all serve somebody, some thing. We all have a focus for our allegiance. We all set our priorities and express that through the way we use our time, our energy, our resources. Some of you here this afternoon will be very clear that you put your effort into serving the community. Some will see the family as the focus of your service. For others, as we remembered last weekend, it is the nation and its identity and ideals that become the object of their serving. Many people look on their employer or their company as their master. Religious people will say that they serve their god, whosoever he or she might be. For many people it is obvious that their priority is to serve themselves. Whom would you say you serve?

Just hold that question in the back of your mind for a few moments as we turn our thoughts back to the words Donald read to us from the story of God’s people as they prepared to fan out into the land that they believed God has promised them. Moses has gone and Joshua, his protégé, is now leading the people. They have crossed the River Jordan, the frontier of their new land, and Joshua gathers the whole nation together at Shechem to deliver a rousing speech and call them to a covenant of unity with each other and of commitment to God. The promise is about to be fulfilled, the promise which has energised their forty year trek across the desert from Egypt. After all the hassles, all the waiting, all the setbacks, all the miracles and all the anxieties, they are about to take the next step towards their destiny.

It would be rather arrogant – and a bit overblown – to say that Wade Street Church stands in that position today, but there are some parallels between what we are doing this afternoon and that day at Shechem many centuries ago. Some of you here this afternoon have indeed been praying for forty years or more for this kind of thing to happen. There have been all kinds of setbacks and hassles over that time and, indeed, in the last three or four years as our plans have taken shape – firstly in our minds, then on Paul Clifton’s drawing board, and then in bricks and mortar and pipework and wiring. We have had times when frankly we have wondered quite what God was calling us to do, and times when we have not really followed where he has clearly been leading us. There have been miracles – miracles of timing, of funding, of provision. And there have been anxieties (just ask Rob Dodd, Ron McGuffie, Alan Maguire or Tony Cadwallader!). But here we are today on the threshold of a new phase in our church’s work and witness. Here we are with those particular hassles behind us and the powerful sense that God is wanting us to move forward into new and as yet uncharted territory.

And as we do, we hear echoing down through the centuries Joshua's words to his people – who are you going to serve? Who are you going to choose? You've got this far, but really it's only the beginning – there are greater and more exciting things still to come. Joshua lays before his people the simple choice: will they choose the gods of their forbears, the gods of the cultures into which they are shortly to immerse themselves, or the One True God, the one who has in his infinite grace brought them this far. The people roar their response, like Chasetown supporters at Oldham Athletic – they want to serve the One True God.

But Joshua knows that this is an occasion charged with emotion, with nationalistic pride, with mass religious fervour. It's **easy** to shout along with everyone else today, he says, but what's it going to be like in a few months' time, a few years' time when the celebratory shine has worn off, when the tough reality of carving out a new situation in a completely alien environment is starting to take its toll on the muscles and the mind? Their choice is easy to make, but amazingly difficult to fulfil. And he tells them that in *vv19.20*, spelling out for them the consequences of their reneging on their commitment. Following God is a tough option. Those who walk the way of Jesus are not unthinking sheep who choose the easiest path. (I get quite offended by those who suggest that I've chosen the way of Jesus because I'm too stupid to consider the alternatives.) Jesus himself made that clear to those who wanted to go with him in *Luke 9:23*. Those who worship God here and who work for the good of his Kingdom in this community can tell you that. Eugene Peterson (author of the popular Bible version *The Message*) wrote this in his book *The Unnecessary Pastor*: “*Now matter how many crosses we hang around our necks, paste on our bumpers, and place on our churches, the radical life of repentance and baptism is mighty hard to sustain.*”

It's still the case, though, that there is a choice to be made, a decision to be made about whom you will serve. And today is as good an occasion as any to reflect on that. The choice now, as then, is yours. No-one can make that choice for you: “*Choose **for yourselves** this day whom you will serve.*” How about you? What are your gods? Where is the focus of your allegiance and your activity? What are your priorities? What things or ideas have we invested with a kind of sacredness that brooks no rival, that recognises no other candidate for the top spot?

Joshua offered them the choice of the gods their ancestors served, the gods of tradition. They were second-hand gods and they led to their followers doing things the way they'd always been done. They might have chosen them because it was just easier to stick with what had gone before. But those gods had let them down. Those gods had not enabled them to escape the oppression of Egypt. Those gods had not been able to deliver the goods during their forty years wandering in the desert. They were gods who were impotent, inert, ineffective. But we are still tempted to follow those gods. We still find ourselves being seduced by the gods of our ancestors – the gods of tradition, of rationalism, of scepticism, of

inertia. We still like to hang on to an idea of God and his ways that has lost touch with where we are today, a second-hand God who was revered by our predecessors but who has become an idea, a quaint nostalgic concept which does not actually affect our lives at all in the present. We no longer experience God, we just like to talk about him. Is that the god you want to serve?

Joshua offered them the choice of the gods of the surrounding cultures, especially the Amorites, who were to be their new neighbours (if there were any of them left). They were the gods and goddesses of fertility, of the sun and moon, of trees and crops, of places and powers – they worshipped the created order rather than the Creator of it all. And those gods, too, had let them down. They'd even tried a few out on odd occasions during their trek – and they had failed miserably. But centuries later, the seduction of the gods of the culture around is as strong as ever. We may protest loudly that we do not serve these gods, but just stop and look where the gods of our culture come in your list of priorities, reflect on how much they shape your attitudes and behaviour day by day. As that song said, we all need something that will offer a focus for our work and worship. Roger Scruton, the philosopher and scholar who had such an influence on some government ideas back in the eighties, has recently published a memoir called *Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life* and in one section he recalls his recent rediscovery of religion, specifically the Christian faith, which has had a deep effect on him. In it he writes:

“You don't have to be a believer to be conscious of a great religious deficit in our society. We saw its effect during the strange canonisation of Princess Diana ... We were in the presence of a primordial yearning for the sacred, one reaching back to the very earliest dream-pictures of mankind and recorded in a thousand myths and rituals.”

We need gods, and so we clothe with a kind of secular sacredness (if that makes sense) those things that we somehow think are vital for our lives, that every right-thinking person needs to accept – things such as freedom to own your own property, freedom to express your own feelings, freedom to seek pleasure wherever you can, human rights, freedom to live in security. And they soon become excuses for consumerism, materialism, hedonism, egotism and militarism – the new gods of the Amorites. Are they the gods you want to serve?

Behind it all, though, Joshua was keen to see that the people realised the One True God was really the only real option. He was the one who had brought them together as a people. He was the one who had liberated them from the forced labour and oppression of Egypt. He was the one who had led them, albeit somewhat tortuously (but that was the consequence of their own choices, it has to be said), across the desert. He was the one who had provided for them and kept them safe during their forty year trek. He was the one who had promised them a new life in a new land. He was their Creator and Liberator. And he still is. He has led the people of this church here for nearly two centuries. He has kept alive the faith of his people through millennia. He has worked in the individual lives of those who form the congregation here week by week. In Jesus he has offered all women and men liberation from the

consequences of their misplaced faith, their wrong choices, their innate sinfulness. His Holy Spirit is still at work today in this church, in the churches of this city, in the growing churches of Africa and Latin America. Is that the God you want to serve?

And let me say to you all this afternoon – regular worshippers here and in other churches: you who have come back here to see what the fuss is all about: you who are representatives of this city and the wider community – let me say to you as Joshua did, “*As for me and the folk here, we will serve the Lord.*” I know it’s not easy. I know there are setbacks. I know that it is not always fashionable. I know that the future could be even tougher than the past. But I would say with St Paul – and I know I’m not alone in this at Wade Street Church, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*” (Romans 1:16). I would like to think that we will continue to serve the Lord whatever comes our way – be it physical persecution as the members of this church experienced during the nineteenth century (from the Anglicans, it has to be said!), be it ill-conceived government legislation, be it the overwhelming tide of what we glibly dismiss as “political correctness” with the shallow scorn of a *Daily Mail* editorial without fully realising that it is the onslaught of a kind of secular religion on the people of God (the French tried it after the Revolution at the end of the 18th century and it failed then as it will now for exactly the reasons Roger Scruton identified).

“*As for me and these folk here, we will serve the Lord*”: that’s what these buildings are for. They are for the service of God. It may be that the people in them at the time are badminton players or young people using their God-given abilities in arts and crafts or Morris dancers or folk trying to find out more about Jesus at an Alpha course, but these buildings are for the glory of God and we believe that somehow his Holy Spirit is present here touching the lives of all who come in, because from serving God comes the imperative to serve the community (not the other way round). That’s been the case since good old William Salt started it all off, and it will be the case long after this present generation of Christians have passed on. God, making himself know in Jesus, is our motivation. Without that we would **be** nothing, we would **have** nothing to offer.

As you’ll know, if you’ve read anything to come out of this church in the past few years – and you’ll see it printed on your song sheets – we believe our calling is to be “*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.*” Without Jesus there at the heart of it all, we are nothing. Without Jesus we have nothing different to offer from what any other suite of buildings in this city has to offer. But Jesus is our priority. We will go on serving him, and motivated by that, we will serve the community around us. This isn’t something to keep to ourselves, something that we have discovered and jealously want to guard. This God whom we serve is the God who makes himself available to all who want to know him, who want to serve him.

So there's the choice this afternoon – we have made our decision and anyone else who wants to join us in that is more than welcome. After all, it's the kind of offer you can't really refuse. In John's gospel he writes of an occasion when Jesus set out his offer to the crowds who were following him. And some people couldn't cope with the apparently uncompromising nature of the teaching, the starkness of the choice. They said they couldn't stick it any longer and went their own ways. Jesus turned to his closest followers, who were still fairly new to him, and asked what they were going to do. As usual, it was Peter who replied – *“Lord, where else can we go? Only you have the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68). What's your decision – a load of hogwash or the only way? The gods of the past and the surrounding culture or the One True God? You've got to serve somebody, so who's it going to be. As for me and this bunch of gratefully forgiven sinners called Wade Street Church, we will serve the Lord. Amen?