

What forms us and shapes us? What defines the people we are, and the communities we seek to be part of? What motivates the decisions we make? This has very much been a question of public debate this week as Prime Minister has decided to suspend parliament. There has been a great deal of public discourse about his motivation for this. He has also questioned the motives of others in the political choices they have made. I listened to an interesting podcast earlier in the week exploring this question of motive and power and consequence. We often hear these questions asked of those in public life, but they are equally questions for us as well. What motivates our decision making, is it about meeting our own immediate needs, or are they about a longer term common good.

It is a theme which JK Rowling plays with a great deal in her writing – not only in Harry Potter but in several of her other novels she explores the sense of what the common good or ‘for the greater good means’. What is the source of our motivation for the behaviours we exhibit? *Soon we must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy*¹ is the way that Dumbledore describes how the difference between decisions which are truly for the greater good, and not just for individual gain.

Our readings today draw us to explore what it means to live as a community of Christians who must make difficult choices about the way that we live. How we work for the coming of the ultimate good – that is God’s kingdom when justice will reign.

Hebrews 13 can read like a list of rules -- do this and don’t do that -- but it also includes some vital and enduring theological truths², which after designed to help the growing Christian community to discern the right choices. After the writer to the Hebrews warns the new community about covetousness and dissatisfaction, he reminds them that God has said, “I will never leave you nor will I forsake you.” There is no need to worry about material goods if you have the presence and protection of God.

One of the joys of our Christian community is that it is constantly moving and changing. While God remains constant and is always with us, we are changing as people, growing and learning more. But at times of course, particularly at times of change, this can mean we have to re-evaluate what defines us, and how our faith is expressed.

The Hebrews text gives us some good markers for how we might go about this. The first mark, which of course lays the foundation of all others to rest on is love. The writer reminds us that this love is in two directions – firstly love of fellow believers in community: "let mutual love continue" (13:1). We are family, and we must continue to nurture and strengthen that bond if we are to find our way³. But love

¹ Dumbledore to Harry in The Deathly Hallows.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2946

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=658

also has an external dimension. As we show love to our brothers and sisters, we do not wall ourselves off as members of a closed or isolated community. We are also to show love to the stranger through the gift of hospitality (13:2). This links in with the second marker – which is to care for those who are in distress as well as those who are in need around us.

The writer then moves on to highlight the importance of fidelity and faithfulness in relationships; and then to contentment for the life in faith that we have. We also are defined by loyalty and constancy. We should remember those who have spoken the word of God to us, for their faithfulness stands as an example for us (13:7). Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Finally of course the community is defined by the commitment it has to worship together, for it is in our worship that we express our love for God. Acceptable worship infuses all of life. Therefore, in our love for each other or for strangers or in our care for those in crisis, we are worshipping God. In our sharing that reflects our trust in God rather than possessions, we are worshipping God. In our faithfulness to worship regularly as a community – our worship of God grows.⁴ Our life too is part of God's work; not because we respond out of guilt or coercion, but because it sustains, empowers and enriches our lives.

In essence this is the message that is being outlined in our gospel reading too – the parable or maybe even good practice which Jesus shares as he is invited to eat the Sabbath meal with one of the leaders of the Pharisees. At this point in Jesus ministry he is causing quite a stir – the religious and political leaders are already nervous about the following Jesus has, the influence on community thought and behaviour. Of course their primary fear is that his power will usurp their own, and so we have the lovely phrase at the beginning of today's reading '*they were watching him closely*' (v1).

And so, as they are watching Jesus, he is also watching them; and he notices what he has so often noticed before (and I suspect many of us might notice when we attend a public gathering) - Jesus notices the guests at the Pharisee's house choosing "places," and so Jesus tells his hearers a parable (Luke 14:7). Unlike many of the parables in Luke this one is not particularly complicated and does not seem to take much unpacking – in fact I suspect nearly all the hearers, including ourselves would get the point of the story as soon as we hear it. "*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

Now at one level this story is about hospitality and table manners – but like the Hebrews message it is also talking about the long game – Jesus is looking at this, as God views it all, within the arc of the divine long-term perspective of eschatology,

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=658

All that takes place becomes a revealing place of God's purposes "in, with, and under!"⁵

That is, how does our life too express part of God's work; so that what sustains, empowers and enriches our lives – but also enriches the kingdom of God and those around us. The interconnectedness of the long game.

We don't always know the impact of a choice we make now will have some way in the future. And it would be unhealthy for us to dwell on such choices too much – as it might stop us from making any decision. But it is important to consider that God's plan for the good of all creation is beyond us, and so there is something bigger than us happening here – a greater good!

Recently I was given a late birthday present. It is a ticket to go once again to the Warner Brother's studios to see the Making of Harry Potter exhibit. As you know, I love that place, and there are several new exhibits which have been unveiled

One of the spectacular things about this exhibition is the scale of it. 100's and 100's of props and artefacts all hand-made or collected from antique shops. One of the reasons that the exhibit is so vast is that when they started making the first movie, only 3 of the books had been published and they knew there were more to come. They needed to prepare for the long-game and plan to keep everything they made in case it appeared again in a later movie.

Now as you know, I could quite happily talk about Harry Potter, and even its theological connections at any point, but the reason for mentioning it again this morning is because of this notion of the 'long-game' and not knowing when we build or undertake something now when it will be used later, or sustains or support us for something that will take place in the future.

Both the writer to the Hebrews and Luke's account of Jesus banquet parable are addressing this same theme. Our faith is forever – it is the long game. We don't necessarily know the journey we will take as a congregation or as an individual. We know it will involve God and we pray that we will continue to grow in faith. We are given tools to work with love, perseverance, community, worship and wisdom. We are reminded that in the end all that we do is for the glory of God and therefore we work to build up God's community and Kingdom in all that we do. What we build today and learn today needs to sustain us not just for today; but be a resource to sustain in the years ahead – and not just for us but all creation.

Motivation for the choices we make is never easy but scripture gives us many resources, like the list we hear today, of gifts that will help us on our way. We are reminded in the words of Jesus that it is not just for today, but for the future also. The ordinary things today bring us to something extraordinary tomorrow.

⁵ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2957

11th after Trinity – 1st September 2019
Ecclesiasticus 10: 12-18; Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16 and Luke 14: 7-14

So regardless of how this week flows, of the decisions which are made which might frustrate us, let us remember that what we do, how we respond is an offering of praise and worship to God – for today and always. Amen.