

Sermon for third Sunday before Lent (Sunday 12th February 2017) - *Mike Fox*

Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

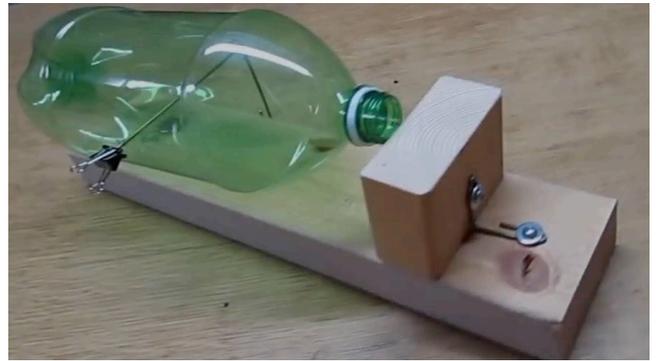
Matthew 5:21-37

Freedom of Choice

On Divisions in the Corinthian Church

Concerning Anger, Adultery, Divorce, Oaths

“Therefore choose life!” A few weeks ago, we discovered one or two things that we had put up in the loft had been nibbled – what should we do? We suspected little furry creatures with long tails and we have heard noises on and off in the cavity wall in the kitchen for a couple of years. Perhaps the scrabbling noises belonged to members of the same species – it’s a bit difficult to tell without being able to see them. So, the week before last, I constructed what I thought would be a humane mouse catcher. It is simply made from an old 2 litre bottle of pop, some lengths of wood, a wire coat hanger and some screws and washers – all it needs is a bit of peanut butter smeared inside the neck, perhaps a bit of cheese down the end. Mice are inquisitive, adventurous and always on the lookout for a free lunch. Our intention was to catch our culprit and whisk him or her off into the countryside to forage there. We obviously didn’t check the bottle often enough and our victim had succumbed before we could release her – was it humane – were we, or the mouse, “choosing life” – I feel that the end was rather less humane than a quick death in a conventional trap?



So, how do we interact responsibly with the world around us? What does it mean to “*choose life*”? Being adventurous reminds me of one of the Quaker Advices and Queries that we sometimes hear read *during* Meeting for Worship. Number 27 reads as follows: “*Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak. When decisions have to be made, are you ready to join with others in seeking clearness, asking for God’s guidance and offering counsel to one another?*” Do you think that this aligns with the reading from Ecclesiasticus?

It seems to me that there is a little more of a focus of living in community in the Quaker reading. The author of the wisdom in Ecclesiasticus, usually known as ben Sirach, seems to be giving advice as for an individual here, inviting the reader to adopt the wisdom of God if he so chooses. And it seems a little black and white; you’re either in or out; choosing life or death; therefore “*choose life*”.

The approach reminded me a little also of the experience that we had last Sunday afternoon when we visited the Mosques in Wolverhampton for their Open Day. I have to say first of all that it was a delight to go and be welcomed so warmly by them in both places and to catch up with one or two people who go there regularly. We know them from the activities of the Inter-Faith movement in Wolverhampton which is particularly strong. The second thing to say is that they were all very clearly comfortable in their faith and willing to answer whatever questions we had about it. We

were shown around by two young mothers; their children were there too but were happily engaged in their own activities. At one point, one of them said that God sees all that we do; there's no point in trying to hide – isn't that a bit like ben Sirach in Ecclesiasticus? And we know from our own scripture that we need to take our faith seriously and beware of being caught up in our own worldly approaches: *"for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"* [Matthew 16:26]. Doing things apart from God is a risky venture; therefore *"choose life"*.



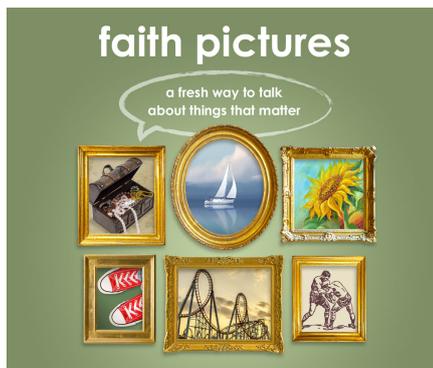
Paul was seeking in his first letter to the Corinthians to ensure that they were on track. He wanted to make sure that they weren't going off in different directions. He is clear in our reading today that they were new in their faith and needed to be built up, but he has also to warn them that should have God in their heart and not be swayed to follow Paul or Apollos or any other of the messengers; it's God who has to be the focus. The same message came through at the Mosque last Sunday. Each believer had his own portion of the carpet aligned properly and it was said that the idea was to bring yourself close to God in prayer. You might be doing it all together, and we can certainly gain strength and comfort from communal prayer, but there is an individual commitment too that needs to be reinforced. One thing that I came away with is the respect with which the Moslems regard believers in the other Abrahamic traditions, Jews and Christians; if we all believe in ONE God, then it stands to reason that he is the same God. It was very affirming and, judging by the report in the



Chronicle this week, they found it so as well having so many visitors coming to see and learn more about their way of life. Yusuf Shafi from the Central Mosque said in that article: *"This shows that we are one big family and we want to invite members of the public to keep in touch with us and keep visiting us, because this is their mosque as it is ours"*. We would say that same about this church within this community, and keeping it open during the day is one way of ensuring that it is used for prayer day by day. Sharing our faith with others is the best way of *"choosing life"*.

You may have read of the mosque that was burnt to the ground in Texas a couple of weeks ago after the president declared his ban on immigration from seven Islamic countries. Not only did the local synagogue offer its premises for prayer, especially on Fridays, their most holy day, but the appeal for funds has already attracted sufficient to rebuild the mosque. This is the kind of support that comes from the grass-roots, and shows that there is a better way. Jesus says the same in the sermon on the sermon on the mount, doesn't he? In our gospel reading, he says: *"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."* [Matthew 5:23-24] In order to build a peaceful world, we need to start with ourselves and put ourselves right with God and our neighbour – reconciliation, not separation is the key – we all share this earth that we live in, and it makes sense to make sure that we all live together cooperatively rather than in confrontational ways. Whenever we are acting in practical

ways like this, we are acting as true disciples of the living God. Acting out our faith in this way can speak more strongly of our faith in God than any words that we might choose to use.

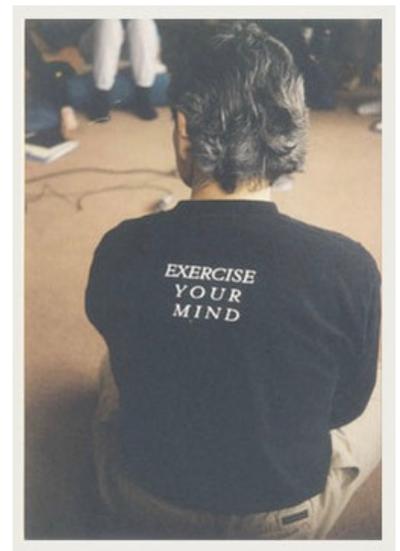


You may be interested to hear about the Lent groups that we are running this year; the course that we are following comes from the Church Army and is all about how we share our faith and is called "Faith Pictures". Why not live adventurously and join a group? Choose life! But beware! Our words need to flow out into our daily lives for them to take on their true colours.

We've thought a bit today about ourselves, becoming right with God in ways that are meaningful to us – Simon's Lent reading recommendation on soulfulness is another way to give ourselves time to strengthen that aspect of our lives. Making sure that we are

awake to all the possibilities that we encounter in the now is a good practice to adopt – we need to become aware of everything that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally (that's Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness). It's all about knowing what is on your mind, or springing up from your soul.

We've thought a little bit about reaching out and acting out our faith adventurously with those we meet – this is the way of building up a true sense of community with those around us. You may know that the last sentence in our gospel reading for today provides the basis of the Law in our Land that allows us to affirm that we will speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth – we don't need to place our hands on the bible and to swear that we will speak the truth; that's putting the onus on the book, when we should really take it on ourselves. Living out our faith through every moment of our lives is a tough ask, but a good ambition to have and to work towards.



We've perhaps wondered about a better world as I've been preaching – it seems to me that when we choose life, we are engaging with what is truly important; our efforts and the efforts of our neighbours, our community, our networks gradually become a force that will transform the world around us. We can pray for that too – let us choose life, and claim the promise that Jesus offers to us all when he says: "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" [John 10:10]

... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, **AMEN**