#  Genesis 25.19-34 OT p.19Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23 N.T. p.11

**16th July 2023**

## Decisions Decisions

**Introduction to the Theme**

A friend of mine, a few years back now, returned home to Britain after visiting a church project in a struggling country where the supermarket shelves were virtually empty. She saw how people struggled as they shopped. There was simply not enough on the shelves for everyone.

Back home she described going into her favourite supermarket and becoming overwhelmed by the abundance and choice around her. It really disturbed her, that sense of us having so much and others so little. For her the decision was what type of loaf, for her friends overseas there were no decisions to be made, just one type of bread was available, and if it was there today it might not be tomorrow.

The necessity to decide because choices are available is both a privilege and a pressure. At times we’re anxious about making decisions, we put them off for fear of making the wrong ones.

In the religious world Billy Graham often called for a decision. He would ask people to get out of their seats and come to the front to show that they had a made a life changing decision to follow Christ.

Indeed, the Bible has moments like this too. Joshua calls on the people to decide this day whom they will serve, and declares *as for me and my household we will serve the Lord.*And, of course, Jesus calls those fishermen by Lake Galilee to leave their nets and make the decision to follow him.

Yet, what happens when making a decision is not clear cut and isn’t just a choice between something so obviously wrong and something so obviously right?

At an extended family party in the garden one summer’s day the discussion under the gazebo got a bit heated. I hate to say it was about Brexit and our little group were somewhat divided. I was rather shocked to hear my youngest son intervene with words of wisdom as he admonished his uncle with the phrase, *you know life isn’t just about binary choices.* I confess I was somewhat surprised, and became rather a proud dad at that moment!

I think he was right, it’s often difficult to make decisions and sometimes the more we know, and the more nuanced our understanding, well the more complex those decisions become.

So, *Decisions, Decisions*, that’s the theme of our sermon today.

From the Jewish scriptures we’ll be looking at the decisions made by Rebekka and Isaac as they brought up their children and then the decisions that Esau and Jacob made for themselves.

From the Christian gospels we’ll reflect on the story of the Sower and the way those different soils can represent the different decisions and responses we make when hearing God’s word.

There’s no doubt that sometimes we think our decisions could have been better. Perhaps we should have bowled rather than bated. On other occasions we might hear someone say something like *marrying my wife, ah, that was the best decision I ever made.*

Decisions – how do we make them and how, then, do we own them?

**Sermon**

Some lines from a beautiful poem by Robert Frost run like this:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

*I took the one less travelled by,*

*And that has made all the difference.*Life is regularly punctuated with *two roads diverging.* We take one way and then wonder about the *road not taken.*

We suppose Mary had a choice when visited by Gabriel, yet she is honoured for her decision to become the *handmaid of the Lord.* And maybe we ponder the possibility that Jesus called more disciples who refused him, than the twelve who said yes.

In my youth I benefitted from a church context that regularly challenged those of us in Bible Class to make a commitment to Christ, and in my tradition that was then followed by Believer’s Baptism. So, I’m enormously grateful for those moments when I was given the opportunity to, as it were, *pin my colours to the mast.*Yet, I’m aware now, almost 49 years after my baptism that making a decision to follow Christ isn’t a once in a lifetime experience as much as a daily one and that conversion isn’t so much an event but an ongoing process that takes us right to the end of life.

Indeed, the question often asked of Godparents in services of Infant Baptism, which they answer on behalf of the child, *Do you turn to Christ?* Is one we all need to answer, daily for ourselves, in our years of maturity.

And what of those times when we take the wrong road because we’ve made a bad decision? How does faith speak into the guilt we feel or the wrong we have done?

Our prayer this morning is that the two set readings for today might help us think through some of these issues about the decisions we make.

Our story from the Jewish Scriptures is of two boys, twins who were just about as different as different could be.

The younger brother, Jacob will dominate the next 13 chapters of Genesis. He’ll be the last of the Patriarchs and he’s such a giant figure in the Jewish story because the name he was eventually known by, Israel, becomes the name of the nation. He is the bridge that takes the narrative from that of a Jewish family into that of a Jewish nation. And yet he is a fraudster, and he made a conscious and determined decision to deceive his father Isaac and thus receive the Blessing of the First Born to which he wasn’t entitled.

Maybe it would be a reasonable question to ask if the boys’ parents’ favouritism in any way influences and ultimately directs this story. Isaac is said to have favoured Esau because he brought him game from his hunting, whilst Rebecca made the tent dwelling Jacob her favourite.

What seems clear in this tale is that it’s Jacob who really values and seems to understand and appreciate the idea of the covenant behind that much longed for blessing. It means little to Esau, so little in fact that he sells it for a pot of red, lentil stew. Something so insignificant, especially to a meat loving hunter.

Jacob appears to value the birthright and longs for it because he sees in it the promises and purposes of God to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. He wants to be part of that story too.

So he cheats. For Jacob the process doesn’t matter. For him the end justifies the means. He can swindle his brother and deceive his father; these were simply the means to obtain something he thought was good.

And that begs the question that never goes away about process. Does the end justify the means? Or is the way we arrive at something just as important as what we find at the point of destination?

Today’s story doesn’t consign Jacob to oblivion because of his bad choices. But neither does it condone him.

These choices have consequences and result in the family enduring years of pain and division. Eventually there is a coming together, but years were lost because of this deception.

Yet there is grace to be found in the story of Jacob who became Israel. He is a highly complex and flawed individual – and that’s worth noting. The Jewish nation does not take the name Abraham or Isaac, but becomes Israel, the name of perhaps its most human of Patriarchs, someone like us, living a life that included regrets, a character full of contradictions.

And maybe Jacob’s frailty points to God’s generosity and grace. That even though wrong decisions were made, through the dynamics that make up all our lives, dynamics of love, forgiveness, lessons learnt, and fresh starts given, today’s reading, mired in deception, is not, in fact either the end or the determining characteristic of the ensuing story.

Our ethics lecturer at college sometimes looked over his glasses and said, *if in life’s journey you can write one more chapter, then you haven’t come to the end.*I’ve forgotten most of his lectures, but I’ve often reflected on that one pithy and helpful sentence.

Most of us will make wrong decisions from time to time which we deeply regret. Yet, when others offer us a fresh start as we try to learn lessons, then the possibilities of writing another chapter come our way. This process of grace and generosity reflects the character of God and helps temper the decisions we sometimes make in life that bring us, and others pain.

In God’s grace Jacob’s story doesn’t have to end with his bad decision, and in that same grace neither do ours.

Now, the Gospel today takes us to, what for many, will be familiar territory; The Parable of the Sower.

You have probably sat through more sermons than you care to remember hearing the preacher take some comfort from this story by saying our responsibility is just to broadcast the seed of God’s word and God’s love, how it’s received by those outside the Church isn’t our responsibility.

Now, I have some sympathy with that application, but I just wonder this morning if we might view the parable not for ‘others’ but for ourselves. For us inside the church who do listen to sermons, try to read our bibles and even say our prayers. What might the parable say to us?

Well, maybe it reminds us that God’s word, those gentle or strong nudges we sometimes sense might be from God, come into our lives at different times and seasons, ages and situations. Sometimes we are like the good soil, we respond attentively and make a decision to listen carefully. At other times that word falls into our lives like seed upon a path, pecked at by birds or strangled by weeds and we don’t listen, and our decisions are not influenced or guided by God.

Jesus shows us the way.

At the beginning of his ministry, he spends time in The Wilderness making a conscious decision to take on that Servant Ministry. At the end of three years, he spends time in Gethsemani’s Garden recommitting himself and making that fresh decision walk the way of the cross, the way of peace and the way of forgiveness. And I suspect, those references in between of him going off by himself to a quiet place of prayer, were those moments when he tended the pathway of his life, clearing away the weeds and birds, so that the seed continued to fall on good ground enabling him to make that positive decision to be the Servant of the Lord.

Decisions, decisions. We make them all the time.

I want to end by remembering what Gordon Wilson did in 1987 at Enniskillen on the Remembrance Sunday when his daughter died in an IRA bomb blast. This gently spoken Methodist Christian, carrying the most intense grief, issued a statement that night saying he bore no ill will, and no grudge against those who had murdered his beloved daughter.

Mr Wilson made a dedicated decision to offer forgiveness in the face of hate. It became known as the Spirit of Enniskillen. In 1997 Jerry Adams apologised to the people of the town for that atrocity and the historian Jonathan Bardon later wrote that in the 25 years of The Troubles in Northern Ireland no words had a greater impact for peace than those spoken by Gordon Wilson.

His decision to forgive became a turning point in the story of The Troubles.

Today we offer up to God our bad decisions praying *Lord have mercy.*

Today we give thanks to God for good decisions through which God has blessed both us and those around us.

In the name of Jesus, who teaches us to make our decisions with prayer and humility. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 14th July 2023*