

Who is on the Lord's side?

Joshua 24 v1-2a, 14-25

Matthew 25: 1-13

Sometimes, in our pleasure in new things, we forget what has gone before. When things have been trying, we embrace improvement in those circumstances gratefully, doing our best to forget the difficulties that have gone on before.

The Israelites could have been forgiven for wanting to forget their past—all those years of wandering in the wilderness, all those who had died along the way. But it was a huge part of their culture to carry the past with them. Although it seemed, at times, that they had very short memories, often grumbling at their leaders, forgetting that God had never yet let them down, remembrance was important to them. And so, in their final crossing over to possess the land they had been promised, we find a litany of all those who had played a part in ensuring that this day dawned.

Their landscape was littered with memorials and their hymns and prayers consisted of many tribute songs and poems. Entering the Promised Land added to that treasure store. Their rituals of remembrance also afforded them opportunity to celebrate.

In our contemporary world, we too have become fairly accomplished in our rituals of memorial and remembrance. Drive any of our country roads and you may see a roadside memorial paying tribute to a loved one killed near that spot. Young people go to great lengths to pay tribute to their peers who have died, both physically and through online forums, forming supportive communities for each other in their loss.

Since the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, we have become a society much more at ease with remembering the dead.

A number of years ago, the town of Wotton Bassett was honoured by royal status. Although a tiny village, it became known far and wide as the place where people pay tribute to repatriated military personnel killed on foreign battle grounds. War memorials serve as reminders of past conflicts and sacrifice.

There is a huge sense that in retelling stories of tragedy, in recalling times of trial, we may somehow be prevented from travelling the same road, being assailed by the same pitfalls. Sadly, too often, this is not the case, and the same mistakes are repeated and the same suffering endured time after time. Nonetheless, it is important to continue to remember sacrifice and give thanks for those who have travelled the path before us, always in the hope that we will learn from the past and be enriched for the next stage of the journey.

Remembering back to the beginning of this extraordinary journey undertaken by the Israelites—it started with the passing over of the angel of death and the community became a community on the move, carrying its faith and its hope and its tradition from place to place, always adapting as required.

The tenets of faith were passed on in their stories and traditions. At last, it seems that the community has, for a time, come to rest, entering a new and settled phase.

And so, there is the opportunity to recover their stories and traditions and celebrate their shaping along the way.

It is time to affirm the God whom they serve, the same God who led them out of Egypt, accompanied them at every stage through the wilderness and meets them in the Promised Land. Remembering, giving thanks, serving God: these are important tasks for any community of faith—important tasks for the church.

The ability to remember is a wonderful gift God has given us. In a flash we can be a child again, skimming stones across a pond, or walking in a meadow. Through memory we can fall in love, get married, & enjoy our children all over again. All this is possible through the blessing of memory. Some of our memories are happy as we recall wonderful experiences. But some are sad, & we may weep as we remember them.

Memories are also very practical. If we couldn't remember that a red light means "stop" we'd be in trouble. If you weren't able to remember what day it is, or your anniversary or wife's birthday – you'd be in big trouble. So, memories are practical. The problem, though, is that sometimes memory fails us. Sometimes we forget and sometimes illness can take away our memories. In remembering God, and all He has done for us, we are challenged. We are either for God or not.

There are far too many Christians today that are trying to keep one foot in the world and one foot in the church. They don't want to make a commitment that might change their status in the world. And they don't want to give anything up in order to really be right with God. So, they end up sitting on the fence, not really a part of the world and not really a part of the church. Joshua challenges us to acknowledge that it is time to make a decision. Either enter the world and live by its standards and collect its rewards, no matter how temporary. Or make a decision to follow God, wholeheartedly and without reservation.

The answer for some is, "Well I want to but not now, now is not a good time." The truth is that for some there is never a good time. They will not come to Christ when they are up because they don't sense the need. They won't come to Christ when they are down.

They are too proud. They won't come when they are in between because they don't even take time then to think about it. In our Gospel reading, the wise virgins were ready. Are we ready or are some of us putting off making that decision? A decision for Christ must not be made lightly.

Joshua was at this point 110 years of age. He was a soldier hardened from battle. He bore the scars of long-term commitment. His choice to follow God was not made lightly, nor was it held lightly. In his study of Joshua, Francis Schaeffer points out that when Joshua challenged the people to choose to serve God and affirmed that this was his settled choice as well. The tense that he used implied more than just a once for all time choosing, as if he could make a choice and be done with it forever. The tense involves continuous action.

That is, it involves the past, but it also involves the present and the future.

It is as if Joshua had said, "I have chosen to serve the Lord; I am choosing the same path of service now; and I will go on choosing to serve God until the very end."

To Joshua serving the Lord was a daily choice. We must be willing to follow through with all that we have. There could be no mixing of allegiance to God with other gods. When Joshua led the children of Israel into the Promised Land, they had picked up the contemporary religious practices and had mingled them with those laid out in the word of God. A firm choice had to be made then, as well as every generation to follow. Men must choose between expediency and principle, between this world and eternity, between God and anything that would try to take His place.

Joshua ends his address with what has become known as one of the most powerful and courageous testimonies and witness in all of Scripture. Joshua said, "... But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." This statement is the culmination of a life lived in obedience to God and His word. There were times when Joshua failed.

There were times when he was discouraged, but once Joshua had committed his life to God, he turned to follow the one true God. Joshua not only influenced his own household but also motivated many others to serve the Lord. For bad or good, our influence always extends beyond our immediate surroundings.

Verse 16 reveals, "So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; (17) for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed." We are challenged to go on and by deliberate, daily choices, to follow Christ in fearless faith just as Joshua had. It may not make us popular, but it will make us powerful as the people of God.

The book of Joshua ends on a note of affirmation. The people responded. They said, (v. 24) "The Lord our God we will serve and His voice we will obey." The bottom-line choice of Israel had long lasting results.

Perhaps you need to make a decision for Christ this morning, to deepen your faith. That is the bottom-line decision in life and when you come to the end of your life, it is the only one that will truly matter. Just remember that when you are faced with a choice, and you refuse to make one, that too is a choice!

There isn't really a place for anyone who tries to sit on the fence. That isn't an option. The apostle John described a church made up of people who were neither hot nor cold (Rev 3:15). The Lord said there "I wish you were one or the other." But the fact that they were just lukewarm, and the Lord said he found nauseating.

We are living in an age when just as He has in the past, he is reaching out his loving arms to folk who are looking for real meaning in their lives. Jesus has promised never to leave us or forsake us. He will never let us down. He doesn't promise an easy life, but He will be there with us every step of the way.

So, let us be like the wise virgins and be ready for the coming Christ by committing ourselves to Him.

Praise be to God! Amen.