



Call to Worship

God guides us and supports us through the twists and turns of life.

May we face the challenges and changes confronting us, with full assurance of God's presence.

God grants us freedom to make our own choices when we reach the crossroads.

May we always choose wisely, following the way of God as revealed through Jesus. Amen

Hymn STF 608 All praise to our redeeming Lord, Charles Wesley

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
Who joins us by his grace,
And bids us, each to each restored,
Together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up;
And, gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope
We hand in hand go on.

The gift which he on one bestows,
We all delight to prove;
The grace through every vessel flows,
In purest streams of love.

E'en now we think and speak the same,
And cordially agree;
Concentred all, through Jesu's name,
In perfect harmony.

We all partake the joy of one,
The common peace we feel,
A peace to sensual minds unknown,
A joy unspeakable.

And if our fellowship below
In Jesus be so sweet,
What heights of rapture shall we know
When round his throne we meet!

Opening Prayer

Lord God, we come before you now to celebrate your majesty, to offer you our praise, and to proclaim your glory. May this worship be worthy of such greatness. May we open ourselves fully to your guidance and your love, ready to be filled with your Spirit, and truly inspired to recognise and be obedient to your calling. When we stray, and fall short, be ready with your forgiveness and renew our commitment to your ways. When our doubts threaten to overshadow our faith, embrace us ever closer in your love and restore our hopes. Fill us with the confidence of your grace alone. Amen

Scripture Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Luke 14:25-33: *Do not face new choices too lightly*

(consider also Luke 9:57-62 as a complementary passage)

Hymn STF 432 Oh the bitter shame and sorrow. *Theodore Monod © Jubilate Hymns Ltd.*

Oh the bitter shame and sorrow
that a time could ever be
when I let the Saviour's pity
plead in vain, and proudly answered,
'None of you and all of me!'

Yet you found me; there I saw you
dying and in agony,
heard you pray, 'Forgive them, Father',
and my wistful heart said faintly,
'Some of you and some of me.'

Day by day your tender mercy,
healing, helping, full and free,
firm and strong, with endless patience
brought me lower, while I whispered,
'More of you and less of me.'

Higher than the highest heaven,
deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, your love at last has conquered:
grant me now my spirit's longing,
'All of you and none of me!'

Sermon

When we read this particular passage in Luke's gospel it feels almost as if Jesus is trying to undermine relationships and almost belittling the importance of loving relationships. You can't be part of my gang unless you are willing to let go of the importance of your other relationships. And you can't be a true follower of mine, as long as you love yourself more than you love me. In chapter 7 of Luke's gospel, Jesus invites others to join him but in that instance they give excuses why they will join him eventually, but first they have to do other things – to put their old life in order before they are ready to move on. In one of those instances, the excuse is to wait until that person can bury their father, though we take from the context that it is a request to wait until his parents have died before he is willing to let go of his roots. Matthew records an incident in which Jesus

almost denounces his mother and brother, as he says that those who follow him and his teaching are his true family.

Does Jesus really consider family relationships with such disdain? Of course he doesn't, and perhaps it is once again important to look at the bigger picture of the gospel, to understand what he is saying, and why he is saying it in this way.

As we follow Jesus' life as Luke reveals the story, we see Jesus becoming ever more popular with everyday Jews, who are drawn to the way he is able to show them the true nature of God with an authority that none of the religious leaders of his day are able to do. Traditional religious teachings appear to say that God can only be truly revealed to the common man and woman with the skill and authority of the religious leaders themselves, and those leaders frequently give more attention to protecting their own power and self-interest, than they do to helping people to nurture their own relationship and understanding of God. Such traditional teaching hides the true encounter with God behind the rules and the barriers the leaders put in the way. It is in stark contrast with this that Jesus cuts through all those rules and strips away the barriers, so that people can truly learn more about the overwhelming love and compassion God has for his people – freely, uninhibited, unearned and undeserved.

This compelling new understanding and authority that Jesus brings to the crowds is accompanied by growing conflict with the authorities whose power base he is threatening. This dynamic shapes the relationship Jesus has with both the crowds and the authorities.

As far as many in the crowds are concerned, Jesus has acquired celebrity status. They are trying to seize the opportunity to rally behind Jesus as the one who will lead them into a new life – free of the oppression of the despised authorities. Someone who will give them all the power they seek without any of the responsibility or accountability. Theirs is a truly superficial understanding of his purpose and his message. Their goal is just as self-centred and hungry for power, as the authorities against whom they want to rebel.

It is in this context that Jesus tells them that if they really want to follow him, they must understand the depth of commitment that requires. The superficial attraction to celebrity will not cut it. Following Jesus isn't just a short-term allegiance until their oppressors have been dealt with, so that they can then go on and build their own power base. No! Following Jesus requires a full and total commitment to a change in lifestyle – a true commitment to stand alongside the disadvantaged. Before you make that commitment, make sure you know what demands it will make of you. There is no half-hearted way to seek the type of future they think they will get if they only grab onto Jesus' coat tails. There is no way to hang onto those bits of the past that you like, and only change those bits about you and your community that you want to change. You have to commit yourself fully.

Jesus is offering people a life-changing moment – the chance to change their future but this is not an opportunity to be half hearted in trying the new way in the hope that you can go back to normal if it doesn't work out. This commitment involves burning of bridges and being prepared to move out into the unknown, taking a risk with your eyes open, but being sure and certain that you will keep going forward with confidence and assurance.

We all come across important life moments. Maybe only a few times in our lives, but times of change. How we respond at those life moments shapes our whole being.

Early in my career I was privileged to receive executive coaching from someone who was brilliant at his job. He was a spooky man to be with – he only needed to be around people for about half an hour to be able to interpret their personality and behaviours in the context of the formative stages and events of their life – the nature of the relationship growing up amongst friends and especially that with parents, even to the extent of being aware of how your parents' choice of career influenced that relationship. However spooky Richard was, he was a great mentor and counsellor. I learnt much from him about seizing those life moments – learning from our journey so far, taking that learning with us when a big decision was required, but committing wholeheartedly to that next step – without regrets, or anchors – just hopes and aspirations, and assurance.

Shakespeare chronicles the seven stages of life, from infancy through childhood, adolescence, two stages of adulthood, old age and death. My friend Richard applies a similar logic to the pattern of life, linking life stages to career decisions. Some times there are momentous changes happening, and at others there are periods of

stability. It would be interesting to hear the results of serious research into how these patterns are changing, as life seems to accelerate around us, and those periods of stability seem shorter and more numerous.

It feels a little as if the whole of society faces similar life changing moments, when we have to make the choice to holding tight to the past, or be willing to move forwards into a new world that some will see as daunting and others will see as exciting. This time of year is full of those life changing moments, as many young people move from one school year to another – some move from school to further education – others will be early in their independent way in life, as they leave full time education behind. In the Methodist church, congregations and ministers will be looking forward to new beginnings. In this circuit, we welcomed two new ministers leaving one ministry behind and beginning their new ministry here in Suffolk. Saul and his family are still in transition from Africa, into a very different way of life.

Today, we will find out which one of the political leaders will have to step up from simply making promises about a new future, and start having to take earth shattering decisions. How will they make that transition, with all eyes on them ready to pounce on failures with an unforgiving and unrelenting pressure? In recent weeks, we have seen the worst that this situation can bring out in people – will we now start to see the best?

When we encounter these momentous life points, how do we respond? In some way it is comforting as we reflect on the highs and lows to pick those things of which we are proud, and from which we want to celebrate both the achievements and the learning. Those strengths around which we want to build the foundations for the next phase of our lives.

But what should we do with those things of which we are rather ashamed? At a time of significant change, it is possible to sweep them away, bury them and pretend they never happened. As we make fresh starts, we have the freedom to suppress the very thought of them. But that is a recipe for disaster – those buried, unresolved issues are the things which scar lives. At some time in the future that repressed guilt will re-emerge, bigger and bolder than ever. No, the reality is that there is just as much learning in those mistakes as in the triumphs. The appropriate course is to deal properly with those mistakes and embarrassing moments, and to understand how to avoid them next time round.

Growth and maturity comes from holding the good and bad in perspective. Don't bask in the glory of one or hide from the shame of the other. Take each in equal measure and create a foundation of experience and wisdom on which to build the next adventure of life.

The Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy sets a similar scene. It comes towards the end of Moses' life when he has been leading the grumbling troublesome people on their journey out of Egypt – full of its ups and downs. Finally, as they stand on the threshold of entering the Promised Land, Moses says to the people – you now have a choice.

Moses comes to the end of his long journey of the exodus. He stands on the threshold of the Promised Land, the goal for which they have spent the last 40 years searching, and he knows that his task is over. He must hand on the leadership to others, and he tells the people that they have a choice. They can remain faithful, or if they favour the instant gratification and tangible lure of the idols in this new land, then they can let go of the God who has nurtured them along the way. They cannot have it both ways. Choose! As Joshua later puts it to the people – “as for me and my household, we chose Life”.

Time and again we find ourselves facing choices – standing at cross-roads, and we sometimes wish we could avoid that difficult decision. Hold onto the familiar, rather than take a step into the unknown. But the thing about time is that it won't stop whilst we make the decision. It will march on, we will find ourselves down one road or the other. Some of us will not like the road we are on, others will have the chance to feel vindicated. If we do not face the difficulty, because it is painful and hard, then we will find ourselves with a wonderful house with no roof. Or with our half strength army eyeballing our enemy's strength. We may be looking back over what might have been, whilst our furrow looks as crooked as a slalom course. Or we may have gone back to say goodbye to our family, whilst the kingdom of God express just left the station.

We must choose. We must choose now. And the choice is often not what it seems to be. The real choice for us is to understand how God is nudging us in one direction rather than another. And I am reminded about the covenant promise, in which we commit to respond obediently to God, and do his will, whether that is to be put

to use, or set aside. Whether it is to do things with which we are comfortable, or those which might prove to be painful to us, but in all cases we must trust that God's plan is better than ours.

As we start this new church year, we have a choice to make – one that we must commit ourselves to follow. That choice is for life or death – spiritual life or death. As for me, and my household, we choose life. What will you choose?

Prayers

We pray for all those who are facing major life choices at this time. For all those whose lives are disrupted by disasters – the natural disasters of flood and drought, and the unnatural disasters of war and unrest. As they are forced to make difficult choices threatening everyday life and relationships – may they be filled with your love, and surrounded by the power of prayer from those peacemakers in the world petitioning for a more harmonious and compassionate world.

We pray for all those at transitions in their education as they move from one year group to another, as they move schools, or begin their university, college or apprenticeship training, and for those who settle into their first jobs after leaving education behind.

We pray for those congregations and ministers leaving one ministry with all its friendships and its unfinished business, as well as its success and memories. As they set out for new beginnings, we pray for the eager anticipation, those forming relationships and the new opportunities set before them.

In silent prayer now, lift up your concerns for those who are facing their own transition points – pray that they may receive the love and support they need through unsettling times. Share also your aspirations and hopes for a world in which injustice is defeated, and everyone is an active member of an equal, fair and caring society, without reservation or barrier.

Our Father ...

Hymn 703 In an age of twisted values, Martin Leckebusch © Kevin Mayhew Ltd.

In an age of twisted values
we have lost the truth we need;
in sophisticated language we have
justified our greed;
by our struggle for possessions
we have robbed the poor and weak -
hear our cry and heal our nations:
your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.

We have built discrimination
on our prejudice and fear;
hatred swiftly turns to cruelty
if we hold resentments dear.
For communities divided
by the walls of class and race
hear our cry and heal our nations:
show us, Lord, your love and grace.

When our families are broken;
when our homes are full of strife;
when our children are bewildered,
when they lose their way in life;
when we fail to give the aged
all the care we know we should -
hear our cry and heal our nations
with your tender fatherhood.

We who hear your word so often
choose so rarely to obey;
turn us from our wilful blindness,
give us truth to light our way.
In the power of your Spirit
come to cleanse us, make us new:
hear our cry and heal our nations
till our nations honour you.

Blessing:

Bless all new beginnings. All those who are at turning points in their lives, their communities and all of creation, that their choices may be founded in faith and commitment and may they choose to follow the way to Life grounded in the justice and compassion and love of God.

As we look to our choices in life, and as we look to those leaders charged with their difficult choices, may we echo with Joshua – “as for me and my household we will choose life.