

## THE HARDEST CHOICE

→ Every day is full of endless choices! From the moment we get up to the moment we go to bed we make many of them for good or ill. And some of those choices can be a struggle as we battle with choosing between what we'd like to do and knowing perhaps what we should do. For example, this morning some of you may have wanted to stay in bed a little longer but you made the wise choice to get up and gather here for worship. And when lunch time comes around you may fancy steak and chips but know that for your own wellbeing salmon and salad may be a better choice. You get the idea!

.....Many of the little choices that we make each day aren't particularly critical but there are lots of decisions that we are faced with in life that are deeply significant for us as individuals and perhaps for those around us in our families. And there are many factors to take into account when we are faced with choices. Aside from our own preferences, we are sometimes influenced by our feelings or the feelings of others, or by the consequences of those decisions. And in the midst of all of that there is the question of what God may want us to do!

→The passage of scripture that we've just heard this morning takes us into the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was facing the kind of decision that none of us would ever want to face. There's no doubt that in his humanity he would have wanted to run a mile from what he knew lay ahead. And yet he knows what God wants him to do. He has come to understand the very purpose for him being here on earth and he agonises about it as he prays in the Garden. And just to add to his agony he discovers that his closest friends are finding it impossible to offer him the support and the help that he so longed for at this time.

.....Jesus must have been feeling dreadful ... lonely, frightened, let down by his friends and full of questions about why the road that seemed to lie ahead of him was necessary. Feelings can be very powerful indeed and it's very easy to see why so often we allow our feelings to be the overwhelming force in our decision making. Most of us will have heard people suggesting that something must be the right thing to do because "it feels right" or "it feels good" or maybe even justifying a particular decision by saying things like "God wants me to be happy! Now, I'm confident that God doesn't take any pleasure in seeing us suffering and unhappy, but his first priority is always that we might live his way because he knows that's the way for us to find lasting peace and happiness.

.....Imagine what would have happened if Jesus had followed his feelings whilst he was there in the Garden of Gethsemane. Surely he would never have gone to the cross would he? He expressed what he was really feeling when he asked his Heavenly Father to take the cup of suffering from him if it was possible at all. But wonderfully Jesus managed to put his feelings to one side and make the choice of short term suffering for himself for the sake of eternal joy not only for himself but for you and for me. That's the choice God had wanted him to make.

.....True joy, peace and contentment are not always found in following our feelings because they can change from moment to moment. True joy is found in following God's plan for us and making the right decisions. But we know how hard that can be so what can we learn from what we see of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane that will help us as we face tough choices in our lives too?

→ Well, as we begin to read this passage the first thing that we discover Jesus doing as he enters the Garden with his friends is praying. As we read the gospels we find plenty of evidence that all the way through his ministry Jesus had made a point of taking time out to be alone with God. Prayer was really important to him. Spending time in the presence of God was vital and through that means of communication Jesus opened every moment of his life to God's involvement and direction.

.....So, when Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane that day, it wasn't a case of shooting off a desperate prayer because his back really was against the wall and there was no where else to turn at that point. But rather in choosing to pray at that moment he was simply carrying on a conversation that he had long been having so that he might finally arrive at a point of knowing his Father's will.

.....How much of a priority is prayer in your life? Is there a dedicated time or place in your day which is given to being with God? Has the importance of prayer in your life grown or diminished during the last year? And what difference might it make to you if time alone with God really was a priority for you every day?

.....The depth of Jesus' relationship with God, through prayer was deep enough for Jesus to have a strong sense of what God wanted him to do. It didn't stop him pouring out how he was feeling and it's important that we remember that. There's nothing wrong with us telling God how we feel about something – he will understand and he will care – but God's first priority is always that we might live his way, not focus on how we feel and we will always be more clear about his will and his way for us when we spend regular time talking and listening to him. So spending time in prayer can help us to make the right choices, the hard choices.

→ Secondly, Jesus had done some prior planning it seems. Notice how in his conversation with God he tells God that he wants to do his will. "Yet not what I want but what you want!" It seems that long before these emotional and traumatic moments in Gethsemane, Jesus has made a decision to obey God. And how helpful it is to have done that prior thinking and planning otherwise it's all too easy for us to be swayed by the emotion or the trauma of the moment and run with our feelings again.

.....Think for a moment about some of the relationships in your life. Like me I'm sure many of you have moments when quite honestly you could swing for your husband or wife or one of your children because of something that they have done or said or failed to do. But you don't because you love them and you remember the commitment you made to them on your wedding day, or the day of their birth or their baptism or some other significant moment when you determined that you would love them and never leave them and always be there for them. And those commitments, that prior planning and earlier commitments all help us to make the right choices about how to respond and how to behave when tensions are running high and life is tough.

.....And in much the same way if we have made a commitment to God which says that we love him and are willing to serve him, as so many of us have and which we renew each year in our Covenant service, then those prior decisions and commitments can give us great strength when we are faced with choices at other times in our lives. We simply need to remind ourselves that we have promised to follow Jesus and to serve him, knowing that the Spirit will give us the strength to do so.

→ Then thirdly, Jesus had a real sense of what his purpose in life was meant to be. He realised that his time had come, that this was the moment that he had been working towards. Timothy wrote in his letter “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” That was his purpose. That was what he now faced as he wrestled in the Garden and the knowledge of that ultimate purpose helped him to make the right choice.

.....But, it's not just Jesus who had a clear purpose for his life here on earth. God has a purpose for each of us too. We are a chosen race, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God! But how are you called to do that? What is your purpose? How does God want to use you as you journey through this life? Discovering and knowing what that purpose is for you can really help you to make some of the tough decisions that come your way because you'll always have that sense of calling and purpose in the back of your mind and that can help you to make choices that don't allow you to stray from God's purpose for you.

→ And finally, Jesus was helped in making his decision by not focusing on the immediate short term consequences of his choice but on the long term results. He didn't make his choice on the basis of what would happen in the next few hours but by focusing on the eternal consequences. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that “He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right hand side of God's throne.”

.....And that's something that we would also all do well to bear in mind when we are facing difficult choices! It isn't always all about what the immediate outcome might be for us or for others. Sometimes we have to look at a much bigger picture and think about the long term outcome and even the eternal outcome. We need to keep our focus on Jesus and our eyes on the prize.

→ There in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced an incredibly tough choice but because of his prayerful relationship with God, his prior commitment, his sense of purpose and his ability to keep his eye on the eternal prize, he made the right choice, the choice that resulted in him doing God's will and dying on a cross for you and for me.

.....All of those things that we have seen in the example of Jesus can help us to make the right choices too, but we might also want to just take note that just because we make the right choice, it doesn't always mean that life gets easier. Right choices can often bring about tough consequences. They certainly did for Jesus and that may be true for us too, which is why it's so important for us to encourage, support and pray for one another as we make difficult choices and then have to deal with the consequences of those choices.

.....But there's one thing we can be sure of and that's that as we journey and as we make our choices in life, God runs the race with us and knows what it feels like to struggle with those decisions and what it feels like to bear the pain of the consequences. He is our companion, he is our strength and he is our reward as we seek to follow the example of Jesus and live our life God's way.