

Bob Dylan came out with a song in 1979 called *You gotta serve somebody*. It got panned by his rock and roll buddies. A readers' poll conducted by Rolling Stone magazine ranked it Dylan's 2nd worst song ever, but it seems pretty sound theology: as human beings, somehow or other, we have our gods: "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you're gonna have to serve somebody." Dylan doesn't go any farther, in this song, to say what might be the consequences of this choice.

Moses goes farther. In Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, as part of his farewell address to the people that he has led through the tumultuous desert journey, he definitely exhorts them to choose "The Lord": "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." (Deut 30: 19-20). We don't hear what the people respond at that point, but Deuteronomy gives us the Lord's pessimistic response: "I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath." (31:21) They will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant." (31: 20). So what does God do, with this pessimistic fore-knowledge? What is God's strategy to try to prevent what is apparently inevitable? God asks Moses to teach them a song, a song which will act as a witness against them. The song is about "The Rock" whose ways are just, a faithful God, without deceit, a rock, who is like an eagle, hovering over its young, bearing them aloft, feeding them, nursing them with honey. (Deut 32:1-43)

We then jump forward in history. Moses has died; Joshua has led the people into the promised land. They have managed to "take over" by a variety of means, sometimes by war, sometimes by trick, sometimes by diplomacy and ambassadorship. Joshua is now at the end of his life. He stands before the people, and just as Moses before him, as his last act, had called the people to choose, now again Joshua calls them to choose, because there are other options. There are other gods. There always are. Sometimes they have obvious names, like Baal or Astarte. Those gods promise fertility, or good crops, and I guess there were always people willing to make sacrifices in the hopes that if the god got the "right stuff" it would respond and come through with the sought-after blessing.

The God Joshua is talking about is different from these other gods in a few ways. Rather than a "bartering" relationship, this Yahweh God is mostly interested in how they treat *one another* and the land. How do they treat people who have accidentally killed someone? Is it revenge or are you going to create sanctuaries of mercy? How are you going to live in the land?

Devour it without limit? Or see it as a gift, to be stewarded with care? How are you going to treat foreigners, aliens, orphans and widows? How are you going to make sure that everyone has a way to make a living, and no one will go naked and hungry? That's what Joshua is asking them: what kind of god are you going to serve?

They say, as they always SAY, when asked: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods." They recite the list of how God has led them, and close with "we will serve the Lord."

But Joshua either does not believe them, or wants to test them, or feels they are being too glib with their words. It is easy, after all, to say "we will follow the Lord"; we human beings are rather notorious for saying one thing and doing another. Joshua knows this, so pushes them: Are you serious? Do you know what you are saying? Do you know this God? This God is no push-over; this god cannot be bribed with sweet words or with sweet-smelling sacrifices. This god is DANGEROUSly serious!

The people again affirm their choice, this time with a few less words : " we will serve the Lord!"

This renewal of loyalty is reiterated.

Joshua: "You are witnesses

People: "We are witnesses.

Joshua: then put away the foreign gods, and incline your hearts to the Lord.

People: The Lord our God we will serve, we will obey.

Then Joshua took a large stone and set it up under an oak tree. You get the sense that despite all the words, Joshua is still not really convinced, because the purpose of the stone is framed entirely in negative terms: the stone will be a witness *against* them, if they deal falsely, which they surely will, and we know they do. The reason for the stone is to protect Yahweh from the deceitfulness of Israel. That's what we human beings do: we make choices we cannot fulfil. We choose, but cannot live into our words.

Let's make one more jump in history. This story of Joshua and the people making this choice was likely *written down* in this form Jerusalem in the years when Babylon was encroaching. The place where Joshua has stood, up north in Shechem, about 600 years earlier, has now fallen into Assyrian hands, and Jerusalem will soon go the same way at the hands of the Babylonians. So much for the "conquest". What needs to be learned, over and over again, is what it looks like to make Yahweh "king." It does not have to do with taking over, victory of a land, but being ruled by an "inclination of the heart" that is turned towards the neighbour. For the writers in Jerusalem, it means finding a way to carry Yahweh with them as they anticipate going into exile, as slaves to a foreign power.

What a profound moment this is, then, to "choose Yahweh" when it does NOT mean success in war, or conquest and winning. To "choose Yahweh" at this point means to trust that no matter what the politics, no matter who has the guns, no matter whether we are conqueror

or slave, there is still the need to choose; there is still a meaning to choosing, and it does not necessarily lead to “success” and victory to do so. It is simply true. Yahweh reigns, and we trust and follow.

We are not tempted by the gods in the way we imagine they were. We don't have little figures with big bellies; we don't have “altars” where we sacrifice our children. But let us not think we don't have other gods. Sometimes they have names like Comfort, Easy-way, Everyone's doing it , Smooth-talker, or “What we have always known” and “the way it has always been.”

We as individuals and families face this choice every day.

We also face it as a congregation. It seems to me that last Sunday after church at our congregational meeting we heard, in a way, a kind of Joshua speech. Not that John Shields is about to die, but he used the word “comfort” several times in his words to you. To paraphrase, you could really say that what John was offering to us last week was the choice between the God of Comfort and the God of Life, the God of “how it has always been” and the God who is always doing a new thing; the God who makes me feel good” and “the God who so loves the world and everything in it.” We were really being asked to choose: “Who will you follow? Who will you serve?” It is easy to come to Sunday morning worship, and say the right words, and even sing the songs that Moses thought would help. But where are our hearts? To what do our hearts incline?

We will always be tempted to Comfort. But does it hold Life? Where is our Life?
The very stones cry out to us : “Follow the Lord!”

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church
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