

## **St Paul's Bedford – Welcome Service – 4.00 pm – 19.5.12**

### **Deuteronomy 30: 19b Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live.**

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*Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

Well I'm here! I've survived the Consecration; over the last two days I have journeyed here over moor and mountain – or at least in the cab of a train, along the Bunyan way and through Luton and Bedford town centres. The new Bishop Richard – at least you can keep the draft letters the same; Nikki can continue to answer the phone 'Bishop Richard's office – in the See of Bedford; or as colleagues in Kazakhstan wrote to me 'congratulations on becoming Bishop of Bedford'. They'll get it right eventually! The new Bishop Richard, delighted to be here, moved by the prayers and welcome we have received (not least from those we have met on our pilgrimage through Bedfordshire and you here this afternoon), open to all that Jesus Christ has in store for me and you in Bedfordshire and St Albans Diocese, and profoundly appreciative of the legacy and handover of the former Bishop Richard.

One hundred and seven years ago a rather larger party from Leicester arrived in Bedford with their priest. A crowd recorded as 50,000 gathered at the Salvation Army barracks to hear this Vicar speak. Ramsey MacDonald was also on the platform. And then after a night's sleep the 440 men set off, the 'morning' so it was reported 'grey and cheerless with no break in the leaden fall of cloud that hung over the town' – well little change there! They sang 'Lead kindly light' at Elstow and then headed for Luton, followed by 'a very cold night in St Albans' and finally arrived at Marble Arch led by a brass band.

This was the Leicester Unemployment March inspired by Revd Lewis Donaldson, the 'vicar of the unemployed'. Men growing increasingly desperate because of the lack of work which meant that many of them faced starvation or the workhouse taking control of their lives; challenging a complacent society that blamed them for their misfortune. And all of this accompanied by their priest who set their endeavours within the compass of God; held before them a vision of a just and righteous society; and who through his witness enabled many to come to faith. God's love laid out powerfully in word and deed.

*Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live.* Moses, near to the end of his life, lays before his people the fundamental choice which faces us all – do we choose life or death; do we choose the path of love and goodness, especially revealed to us in the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ; or do we wander from the way? Or in the imagery of the first letter of John, do we walk in the light or stumble in the darkness. Whatever our faith or our convictions, it is that essential human challenge of recognising, as those Leicester marchers sang, the need for the light to lead us on amidst the encircling gloom; of making the choice of life so that we may indeed live

fruitfully for each other and for God; and even more importantly, as Moses reminds us, that it may also be a choice of life for the generations to come – so critical an issue in this world of scarce resources, rising tides, and climate change. *Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

It is that choosing of life that is our personal journey into the love of God. On retreat last week I re-read Ephesians and especially paused at St Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus. He asks that they may receive *the spirit of wisdom and revelation that (they) may know him better* (1:18) and that would be my prayer for us all that we might indeed know the love of God in Christ better.

On that same retreat I encountered the testimony of Ety Hillesum.

Ety Hillesum was a Jew resident in wartime Holland who died like so many of her fellow Jews at Auschwitz. In his book 'A life transformed' Patrick Woodhouse relates through use of letters and especially her journals her spiritual transformation. It is a life initially characterised by inner chaos, erotic licence, and insecurity, all fostered by the fear and hatred that was affecting all around her. And yet in the midst of all this she encounters something of the presence of God – *our greatest and most continuous adventure* – as she describes Him. On a diet of the psalms, the Gospels and Paul's great description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 her life is turned round and we see someone who in the midst of evil holds fast to the good; who discovers the need for prayer, who refuses to submit to hatred and who serves those around her.

*Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

It is that choosing of life that is not just our personal journey, but is God's promise to his world; the promise of transformed community in which our calling to live for one another is fulfilled and not denied.

Those Leicester marchers hoped to meet the king but he would not meet them. They also hoped to meet Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he too wouldn't meet them – echoes here of other occasions when the Church has failed to catch the spirit of the moment. The Archbishop pleaded the 'ceaseless stress of other duties' which meant that he had not been able to consider properly 'the details of this particular controversy, such study as would justify me in making myself responsible for thus endorsing the representation of those who are coming to London to plead their cause'. A response which drew from the Labour leader Kier Hardy an open letter to the clergy: 'The religion which demands seventeen hours a day for organisation, and leaves no time for a single thought about starving and despairing men, women and children has no message for this age'. Indeed it doesn't! And at a time of significant unemployment especially among the young in all communities; of continuing fiscal crisis; and real need in the lives of so many the call to the Church and us all to passionately live community in a Kingdom focused way must be before us all – and especially here I look forward to

working with you in partner churches, in our civic institutions and in our wider faith communities. Let us together *choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

Choosing life that is our journey deeper into the love of God; choosing life that is the promise of transformed community; choosing life that is the nurture of new disciples.

1958 was a portentous year! The Munich air disaster; CND is launched; the first stretch of motorway is opened; Blue Peter is broadcast for the first time; and Empire Day is renamed Commonwealth Day. And it is the year that Callum Brown in his 'The Death of Christian Britain' says saw the end of a post-war growth in institutional religion, and thus the start of the journey of decline ever since. 1958 is also the year I was born! I don't believe the two are related!

And yet all my life, and all my ministry, has been in the context of a church that was basically on the decline, at least numerically; and that's despite the many recent signs of new growth. It is not an easy backcloth for any us and the challenges of mission and evangelism test us all. I look forward to mutual encouragement in that calling. But the one thing I do not believe is that decline is inevitable; I do not believe that faith, and especially faith in Jesus Christ is somehow irrelevant to this present age; I do believe that the call to discipleship remains a gift of utter preciousness that is ours for the world. *Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

Among the most impressive people I have met recently have been Ray and Vi Honeyford. I met them in Leicester Prison where I was attending the final session of a six week Sycamore Tree Course; a programme that uses the story of Zaccheus to help young men, in this case at Leicester Prison, to reflect on their actions and to begin to understand what it might mean to say sorry to their victims. Ray and Vi were also there and they told me their story. About ten years ago their two teenage sons were attacked in South London and their eldest son was murdered.

We can sense something of the desperate loss they experienced, but despite that they tried to understand what it meant to respond as Christians. Despite all the pain they sought to bring healing out of this dreadful event. In particular they told me that they were – and I think this is the right word – they were 'excited' that at last they were to soon meet the young man who killed their son. They were hopeful of the opportunity to create new relationship, to offer forgiveness, and to bring healing.

How we live the life that God has given us with all its joys and pains; how we take control of our lives whatever the circumstances just like those men of Leicester a century and more ago; is about what we choose. *Now choose life so that you and your descendants may live* says Moses; walk in the light says John; abide in my love says God; for by choosing life and not death we journey into God; we journey out to the world; we journey with those Christ is calling to himself. Choose life – let us do that together for our own sake and for the sake of the world.