

MARK 10:17-31  
CAMELS AND NEEDLES

Choices: we make them all the time. There are small choices: what clothes to wear; what to have for tea. Some choices are more significant: what kind of car to drive; where to go on holiday; how much to pay for a new TV. Some choices are life-shaping: which school to send your children to; who to marry; which church to become part of; how much time to give to reading the Bible and prayer. At least one choice is life-changing – do I follow Jesus or not? Every choice that we make has a consequence: with the small choices, we hardly notice the consequences, though depending on what we have for tea it might have an effect on our body! The larger the choices are, the more noticeable become the consequences and so we have to learn to take responsibility for the choices we make; we can't blame it on someone else, when we're ones who have chosen to behave in a particular way.

The three big news stories around at the moment are all about choices, consequences and responsibility in some way or another. A few weeks ago, the story broke of Hillsborough in 1989, that the police chose to open the gates to the stadium with disastrous results; 96 people died as a consequence of that action and then the police decided to shift the blame onto the victims; the nation is aghast at what has now been revealed. Lance Armstrong chose, it would seem, to cheat his way to Tour de France titles by taking drugs and using various other illegal methods and then bullied other riders into the same kind of measures; these other riders did have a choice, but were so bullied by a powerful and famous man that they went along with it. Armstrong has been stripped of his seven titles as a consequence of these revelations. The story of Jimmy Savile: he made choices and only now the story is being told and it is a horrendous story; other people are having to live with his choices and the behaviour that he forced on his victims; but it is also apparent that other people knew what he was doing and they too made a choice – to stay silent and there have been consequences of that choice too; other people became victims because people stayed silent for fear of one individual. We make choices; choices have consequences.

Bethel was one of the great shrines of Israel in Old Testament times. It began with the story of Jacob and his encounter with God in the dream of the ladder coming down from heaven in Genesis 28. It became a place where people would go to meet with God; God was there and they could go to encounter Him. It was also the place where lives were transformed: Jacob became a new man after his dream, he trusted God and his fears were gone and so people going to Bethel would encounter God and His life-giving presence would transform their lives. That's as it was in Israel's past and that's as it should have been, but that's not how it was when Amos spoke. God is being left out; people are hearing the words, but are choosing to ignore what God says; they come to Bethel to worship and make their offerings, but they leave untouched by the experience; they have a religion that leaves their lives untouched and that's way they like it!

Amos was a prophet in the eighth century BC; he is not content to leave Bethel like that, to leave people in their complacency. First of all, he points out their wrong choices: "*You who...*" (Amos 5:7,10) They don't like truth and justice; they trample down these high principles; they despise those who talk about truth. They have chosen not to let truth shape their lives, but to have their lives shaped by other things: selfishness, greed and power. There are consequences, two of them: first of all, "*you oppress...*" (5:12b) - their behaviour is not good; they ignore what God has said about justice and good treatment

of the poor and they engage in bribery and corruption and take advantage of those who are weak; “people are there to be milked.” (Motyer) It is not good and not what God wants of His people at all. Secondly, “*Therefore...*” (5:13) Anyone who wants to get on in that society just keeps his mouth shut; protest is silenced; it creates a society where wrong-doing is encouraged and where standing for principle is discouraged; who would put their head above the parapet? The consequence of their choice is that evil has its head.

Amos put his head about the parapet! He gave the people another set of choices: “*Seek good...*” (5:14f) There is something to seek and something to shun: seek what is good, shun what is evil. Love what is good; hate what is evil. Good is something not just to be admired from a distance, but is to be loved with a passion and is to be embraced in the way that we live our lives and in the society that we shape. This is the attitude that God wants to see in His people. It is so easy to become disillusioned: “it does not matter what I do; it will make no difference!” yet if everyone thought that way... It is so easy to become complacent: “God will sort it out!” but perhaps the way in which God wants it to be sorted out is by His people making ordinary choices to love and embrace what is good and to hate and shun what is wrong. These choices open the door for God’s blessing to be poured out on His people, with mercy and grace to change their lives.

The story of the rich young ruler is such a powerful story about choices and where someone who seemed not to make a choice, did by going away! The rich young man came to Jesus with one of life’s big questions: “*What must...*” (Mk 10:17) “How can I be saved? What is life all about?” Jesus maybe gave him the answers that he expected to hear, answers all about keeping the commands and things to do in life. His reply suggests a naiveté, that he hadn’t really grasped what the commands were about – loving God, loving our neighbour. “I’ve done all of that!” Jesus takes him a stage further: “*One thing...*” (10:21) Jesus, it would seem, warmed to this young man, but that didn’t stop Him telling him the truth. Maybe the young man thought he’d be welcomed with open arms because he was a prominent person in the town, but Jesus spoke the truth; he still lacked something and he needed that one thing.

What was it? Well, it centred on his wealth: “*Go sell...*” (10:21) Why that? The problem was not the money itself, but what the young man thought about his money. Jesus was facing the young man with a choice and Mark doesn’t tell us how that choice is resolved; all that we’re told is that “*At this...*” (10:22) and are left to surmise that he went away and didn’t come back. In which case, Jesus had read the young man’s heart perfectly. His money was more important to him; his money was something that he could not live without; his money was a bit of an idol. The one thing he lacked was “a single-hearted devotion to God.” (Cranfield) He needed his heart to be changed, but he was not willing to make that choice; what he was being asked to lose was too much, so he went away; he chose to leave Jesus for his wealth. Now, don’t take this story to mean that we all have to give up all our cash before we can be part of God’s kingdom; we need to ask ourselves “what gets in way of our single-hearted devotion to Jesus?”

Do you think the disciples were disappointed to see the young man go away? “He would have been a good addition to our number, Jesus! Why didn’t you try harder to keep him?” That led to a conversation about the kingdom and what it means: “*How hard...*” (10:23,25) There are all kinds of ways in which people try to understand camels and needles, but it seems to me that the simplest is the best: Jesus is taking two things that are impossible to bring together to show how hard it is for rich people to enter the

kingdom. The camel was the largest beast in Israel at the time, the largest animal that the disciples would have seen and everyone knows how small the eye of a needle is. The largest animal going through the eye of a needle? Impossible! Precisely, but not for God; God can change people's hearts so that they make good choices; God can change people's hearts so that they are willing to give up even their wealth because they love God more and have this single-hearted devotion to God. It seems impossible, but God can do it! God is the one who saves; we believe the gospel.

There are consequences of the young man's choice: he missed out on the blessing of God. He walked away from Jesus because he loved his money too much and as he walked away he turned his back on the most important thing he had ever encountered. How could we calculate what he lost?

Choices: we all make them and they shape our lives. For example, there are choices that we make about faith and being disciples of Jesus; the choice to come to Church every Sunday, or one Sunday in four; we see the intimation about Church Wednesday, prayer and a conversation about the Bible, or about Bible reading notes and we choose to come to the meeting or not, we choose to read the Bible or not. The choice not to come or not to read is just as much a choice! These may seem small things, but the way in which we exercise these choices will say something about our devotion to God and how is strong that devotion. On a bigger scale: we all know there is corruption in the world; the governments of Africa and multi-national businesses are taking £3000 per second in corrupt payments: what do we do? We have a choice: we can join the *Unearth the Truth* campaign run by Tearfund, or by and large do nothing; the world stays silent on this issue and as result the people of Sierra Leone are amongst the poorest in the world; their drinking water and their toilet is the same water. If that money was used justly and honestly, it would be enough to give everyone in Africa a safe and clean water supply. People suffer when we stay silent, choosing to do nothing; "it is too hard, no-one will listen!" – well, if everyone stayed silent, there would be nothing to hear! Choosing to do nothing, to say nothing is as much a choice; choosing to stay away is as much a choice; choosing not to engage with questions and issues of faith and society is as much a choice.

The best life choices we can make are those which feed and support and grow our devotion to Jesus and those which love our neighbour. These choices come with a commitment and sometimes a cost, but the best things in life are not always free! Choose what is good; choose things that make our faith grow stronger; choose things that will help us love Jesus more; choose things that show love to people in need and that help those who are weak and vulnerable in the world. Above all, choose to be the kind of people that Jesus wants us to be, people with love in our hearts, to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We will still get it wrong from time to time; we will still make wrong choices, but the Spirit of God is at work in us, inspiring us, prompting us, helping us; listen to Him!