

Lord God, for all that has been, thank you. Open our eyes to see your involvement in what is, and guide us by your Spirit to live lives that will bring heaven to earth. Amen

- I want to talk to you today about making choices. So here, straight away, is my first choice. You can choose either to listen to my sermon, or you can choose to go and help make a colourful banner at the back of the church with Katrina! ...
- ... Jesus talks about ploughing a field, ploughing a straight furrow in today's Gospel reading.
- *'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'*
- I'm quite hesitant about talking knowledgeably about ploughing a field when I've got two farmers in the congregation today, but I understand that before the age of monster tractors, when you had to lead your horse by hand across a field, it was important to look straight ahead and aim for a specific point on the far side of the field. If you didn't, as soon as you look back to see how you were doing, you'd take your eyes off the target and the furrow behind you would veer off, the path of the furrow becoming crooked.
- At the risk of creating a crooked path, if I were to look back and plot the path of this benediction over the last 18 years, as we have ploughed our way inexorably into the future, have we been leaving behind us a nice straight path? And I'm sorry to have to report that that I don't think that we have. I'd give us about 6 out of 10. And that's probably being generous!
 - Isn't it fortunate that God isn't interested in scoring us to make sure we are fit for the Kingdom of heaven? Would we make the grade?
- Jesus was on a mission of course. He was determinedly spearheading a nice straight path direct towards Jerusalem, without once looking back. *'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.'* He was on a mission to bring heaven and earth together through his love shared for us on the cross.
- A heavenly 10 out of 10; perfect love directed straight towards us, who spend our time trying to keep heaven for later and enjoy the delights and privileges of life on earth without taking any of the responsibilities.
 - It doesn't take a genius to see examples of this as you look at Downing Street parties, or flagrant misuse of the earth's resources causing climate change, or making sure we've got enough before giving a small amount to charity, or invading foreign countries because we want to assert our power, or jetting off overseas when we are so cautious about letting refugees enter our own country, ..., or even assuming we deserve the right to retire when we want to!
- Human beings want an easy time now without worrying too much about the future. It's natural.
- It's all a long way from the Kingdom of God, and we want to keep heaven and earth separate.
- I think that's what St Paul means when he makes such a distinction between the things of the flesh and the things of the Spirit in this morning's reading from Galatians. *'what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other'*. We want earth now, and heaven later. Keep God in his place and let us get on with the compromising job of living life on earth!
- And into this parachutes Jesus, the divine Son of God, a human being from the soles of his feet to the hair on his head. Single-mindedly, he trudges towards Jerusalem where his life on a cross will be the proof of the lengths God is prepared to go, to prove that perfect love conquers everything, crosses every divide and brings heaven and earth back together again.
- So that leads us to the first question. The first choice. What do you want out of life?
 - A settled and happy family life? Enough to live on without going short? Good health? That's not too much to hope for is it?
- Well no. I don't think it is, but the problem is, that none of it is guaranteed. And anyway how comfortable do you feel with having an acceptable standard of living knowing there are penniless refugees from Afghanistan in bed and breakfast accommodation in Luton? Much better to keep them on the other side of the English

Channel so we don't notice them so much. Out of sight and out of mind. And how pleasant is it having a settled and happy family life when you know your next door neighbour is going through a vicious divorce.

- And if you add to the mix the problem, that unless we swiftly and radically change our way of life, climate change is going to make all these reasonable aspirations even less likely as it turns the world upside down, then these reasonable hopes start to look ever more unlikely.
- That's why Jesus gives all these strange answers to people who he meets on his way to Jerusalem.
- To the person who said, *'I will follow you wherever you go'* Jesus said, *'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'* Maybe Jesus sensed that he didn't want to leave his house? It's great following Jesus in a metaphorical sense. It's harder when we start having to make uncomfortable choices. Does that ring bells with you?
- To the person who wanted to bury his father, he appears insensitively rude, *'Let the dead bury their own dead'*. Note the Jewish hyperbole and irony here, surely making the point that you've got to keep your priorities in the right order.
 - Of course there's nothing about this poor bereaved man staying to bury his father and believing in Jesus at home. But at this stage in Jesus's ministry would this have changed his life? Would this have brought heaven to earth? Or would it just have succeeded in keeping them separate?
- If you and I want the benefits of the Kingdom of heaven today we need to be uncompromising in our decisions and our life. Which is more heavenly, more Godly? To give all our money to the poor or to give a small percentage so we can still afford to shop at Tesco? I'd give myself 4 out of 10 on that one. Isn't it fortunate that God isn't interested in scoring me to make sure I am fit for the Kingdom of heaven? Instead he comes as close as he can, through his Son Jesus and invites me, wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly to follow. And the more I do, the more I see heaven on earth.
- But it's hard! It's hard to give generously, so generously that it hurts. It's hard to walk a mile and a half instead of jumping in the car to help save the planet. It's hard to button your lip instead of giving it all you've got when somebody is clearing taking you for granted. It's really hard to live values like *'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'*
- So if what you want in life turns out to be heaven on earth, how do you get it? Is it just by hard work?
- St Paul puts human beings into three categories. There's those that live by the flesh. That's keeping heaven and earth clearly separate, living for ourselves and what we want. And as we've already said, that's not guaranteed and leads to a more divided, more selfish society.
- Then there's those who live by the Spirit. He says, *'If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.'* So there are also those who are *'guided by the Spirit.'* I wonder if here he is making a distinction between those who *'live by the Spirit'* and those who are *'guided by the Spirit'*? He certainly seems to be implying that there are some who *'live by the Spirit'*, who believe all the right things, who follow Jesus from the safety of their own lives but who do not let their lives be *'guided by the Spirit'* to the extent that they would be prepared to leave everything behind and wholeheartedly follow Jesus. Perhaps this is a particularly Churchy problem where say all the right things, believe all the right things, but do not allow the Spirit to guide our lives, our decisions, because it is just too life-changing, too disturbing, too frightening.
- Which camp would you put yourself into? And which one would you like to be in?
- When I look back over the last 18 years I can see a few times when we have been *'guided by the Spirit.'* here in St Mary's and St Margaret of Antioch. I think resettling Syrian refugees would be one of those occasions. I think raising money to employ a youth worker might be another. I think our recent mission linking faith and climate change might be a third. You may be able to think of others. All of those needed significant commitment in time, money and energy from a substantial number of the congregation. But actually it was something else that made them successful. I believe that the Holy Spirit was at work guiding us and moving our hearts to respond in actually quite extreme ways that I'm not sure would have happened it were just left down to us mere mortals!
- And that's why I'd give us as much as 6 out of 10 when looking behind to see how straight our furrow is.

- But don't look back too much or you really will make your furrow crooked. Instead look to the future with hope and trust, ask to be guided by the same Spirit in whom we believe and thank the God of love for his Son who brings new life out of the most desperate situations and doesn't expect us to achieve miracles or even to live a meaningful life by ourselves but instead sends us his Spirit to live by and to guide.
- God bless you all!