

CIRCUIT SERVICE RESOURCE

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Focus: Choosing to live life God's way prepared by Revd Audrey Browne

Welcome and Notices: steward

Introduction:

In last week's gospel reading (Matthew 5:13-20), Jesus urged his hearers to "practise" the commands of God and teach others to do the same. As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus illustrates with practical examples that show how God's kingdom values go much deeper than the outward keeping of the law. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to examine the intent and motives of our hearts.

Call to worship:

Some words from Psalm 119:1-2 (easy-to-read-version)

Great blessings belong to those who live pure lives!

They follow the Lord's teachings.

Great blessings belong to those who follow his rules!

They seek him with all their heart.

Let us pray:

Holy God, whose way is blameless,
as we come to worship you, give us ears to hear your voice,
hearts to receive your word and the courage to put into practice
what we have heard and received. Grant us the grace and the wisdom
to follow in the ways of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

*We sing together our Opening Hymn: HP 13 / StF 83: Praise my soul the King of heaven,
words by Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuLmDye_5ys*

<p>Praise, my soul, the King of heaven; To his feet your tribute bring. Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, Evermore his praises sing. Alleluia, alleluia! Praise the everlasting King!</p> <p>Praise him for his grace and favor To his people in distress. Praise him, still the same as ever, Slow to chide, and swift to bless. Alleluia, alleluia! Glorious in his faithfulness!</p>	<p>Fatherlike he tends and spares us; Well our feeble frame he knows. In his hand he gently bears us, Rescues us from all our foes. Alleluia, alleluia! Widely yet his mercy flows!</p> <p>Angels, help us to adore him; You behold him face to face. Sun and moon, bow down before him, Dwellers all in time and space. Alleluia, alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace!</p>
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Prayers of Adoration, Confession, and Assurance of Forgiveness:

God of integrity, truth and wisdom,

we bring our worship to you.

Jesus, who lived life in all its fullness,

yet without sin,

we give you our adoration.

Holy Spirit, who leads and guides us

in the ways of God and His Son Jesus Christ,

we offer you our lives.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

accept the offering of our lives in worship to you,

through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord:

Silence

Reconciling God,

you invite us to choose life,

yet so often, we choose those things that lead to pain.

Forgive us when we make wrong choices,

when our decisions lack integrity.

Forgive us when we hurt others with our words and actions,

when we judge others and think ourselves better.

Forgive us when we do not strive for peace.

Reconciling God,

help us to choose life – the life of your Son,

Jesus Christ our Saviour:

Silence

In Jesus Christ,

we are restored, healed, and forgiven,

we are reconciled to God and to one another,

we can live in love, peace, and harmony,

with God, ourselves, and each other:

Amen! Thanks be to God.

Silence

The Collect:

O God,

forasmuch as without you we are not able to please you;

mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit

may in all things direct and rule our hearts;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The first two readings:

- **Old Testament:** Deuteronomy 30:15-20
- **Epistle:** 1Corinthians 3:1-9

A Brief Reflection:

There is a lovely scene in *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie: the children have seen Peter fly and they wish to fly too. They try to fly from the floor and from the bed but fail. 'How do you do it?' John asks Peter: Peter answers, 'You just think wonderful thoughts and they lift you up into the air.'

It is not as simplistic as Peter Pan makes it out to be, but it is certainly true that how we think affects our whole life. The Apostle Paul understood this when he said these words in Philippians 4:8: "*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true...honest...just...pure... lovely...of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*"

It is not what we do but why we do it that has great effect. Too often we do not give enough intentional direction to what goes on in our thoughts. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to examine the intent and motives of our hearts.

*We sing together our **Second Hymn: HP 378 / StF 545: Be thou my vision, Irish, 8th century, translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931); versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull 91860-1935) (alt.)*** <https://youtu.be/YxvXGgSIRcs>

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art Thou my best thought, by day or by night Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son Thou in me dwelling and I with Thee one Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight; be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might; be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower: O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power	Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise Thou mine inheritance, now and always Thou and Thou only first in my heart High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun, O grant me its joys after victory is won; Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall still be thou my vision, O ruler of all
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- **Gospel:** Matthew 5:21-37

Sermon:

During a flight, on the way to Barbados, an air hostess asked a passenger "Would you like dinner?" "What are my choices?" he asked. "Yes or no," she replied.

In our readings today, the element of choice is critical to our relationship with God and one another. Moses admonished the Hebrew people to '**choose life**', Jesus told his disciples and the crowds to '**choose integrity**', and Paul appealed to the believers at Corinth to '**choose spiritual maturity**'.

In our modern culture, there is a strong inclination for what is often referred to as "**both/and**" thinking, as opposed to "**either/or**". The "both/and" thinking aims to create a "win/win" situation where everyone is happy. This may be very wonderful when it works out fine for all involved.

However, Moses told the Hebrew people that sometimes "both/and" is just not possible. Worship of the God of Israel and idols (anything that comes between us and God) cannot co-exist.

Our passage from Deuteronomy comes at a pivotal moment in the story of the Exodus. Moses is almost at the end of his life. He reminds the people that life in the Promised Land is not just a matter of geography (crossing the Jordan and taking the land), it is also dependent on a covenant relationship with God. And so, Moses reminds them that the outward physical journey is only part of their story — there are also moral and spiritual choices to be made. Moses admonished them to choose life — and this means that they must give their total obedience, love, and loyalty to God.

Jesus picks up Moses' theme of walking in God's ways by inviting his hearers to think more deeply about the "**why**" of the rules that were given. Jesus used three of the Ten Commandments to teach a much higher standard than the outward keeping of the law. So it's deeper than murder, it's being angry with intent. It's deeper than adultery, it's looking lustfully. It's deeper than divorce, it's the trivializing of marriage. It's deeper than swearing, it's the misuse of God's name. Jesus enriches the received teaching and takes it to a new level. This is very challenging indeed! But Jesus' words invites us to live by the spirit of the law and not just by the written code.

I remember singing this song in my youth group as a teenager, '*Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer*'. This seems like a good way to approach our gospel reading. I had an old pastor as a teenager, who used to say to us as young people just starting out to break-open the Scriptures, "**you must never preach to others what you do not equally preach to yourself.**" There is such wisdom in that! Those of us who break-open the Scripture must make it abundantly clear, that we also are under the authority of God's Word that is preached, as much as the people who are listening. Jesus' invitation to look at the written code in a new way is often too challenging for us all, both personally and communally. And it is often so easy to excuse ourselves as 'only human'. But for Jesus, there are no big or little sins — there are sins! So Jesus is **not** sending any of us on a "guilt trip", rather, he invites us to think more deeply about what may be the root causes of our words, actions and attitude.

We **all** are invited to sit at Jesus' feet, and to allow his teaching to shine a spotlight deep into the recesses of our life, so that by God's grace, we can live with an inward integrity before God that works itself out in our daily living. The original theory about what caused the Titanic to sink was that the ship hit an iceberg, which opened a huge gash at the side. However, an international team of divers and scientists used sound waves to probe through the wreckage of the Titanic, buried in the mud two and a half miles deep. They surprisingly discovered that the damage was small. Instead of a huge gash (as initially thought), they found six relatively narrow slits across the six watertight holes. It was these small damages, below the waterline and invisible to most, that sank the Titanic.

In the same way, small compromises, unseen to others, can ultimately sink our character. This is what Jesus wants us to see by shifting the focus away from just the outward keeping of the law, to the inward motivation and intents of our heart.

The Apostle Paul expressed deep concern for believers who seem never to have left the nursery. "*You are infants in Christ...I fed you with milk...for you were not ready for solid food!*" Paul gave the Church at Corinth a true appraisal of their spiritual reality. He told them that petty jealousy, arguments, and allegiance to "**this or that personality**" have no place in the body of Christ. Paul recentred their thinking by demolishing the pedestals on which they had set him and Apollos. Paul says that he and Apollos are only servants, gardeners, and labourers in God's field. In order to come into a fuller relationship with God, the Church at Corinth needed to turn their focus away from human agents to God, and allow God by his Holy Spirit to do his work in them.

God's work in us can, at times, feel deeply unsettling, especially when the field of our life is broken up for fresh planting, and the building that has been our life is deconstructed in order to be rebuilt. Maintaining a steady focus on God is challenging, but it is essential for our spiritual growth and development. Paul says that our spiritual maturity begins by turning our focus towards God and acknowledging that all growth comes from God.

I saw a documentary some years ago about a true story of a young man whose arm got trapped under a rock while he was hiking. After days of trying to get the rock off his arm he realized that he could not do it and that he was going to die. Then, he says, he had a moment of clarity, he did not need to die, but, he would have to lose his hand and part of his arm. So with all the courage and strength he had, he used his pocket knife to cut off his own arm.

Our readings challenge us to take our relationship with God that seriously.

Not to literally pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands, but, with God's help, to make the radical changes we may need, so that our personal and communal life may be continually shaped by authentic relationship with God, that works itself out in our daily encounters.

Thanks be to God, we are not robots. God has given us the wonderful gift of 'choice' – and we can, with God's help, choose to live life God's way. **Amen**

A Prayer of Thanks:

Let us give thanks to God:

Loving God,
we thank you, that you have taught us another way,
that offers us life in all its fullness.
Thank you that you have shown us a different path:
a path of truth and humility,
a path of wisdom and integrity,
a path of mercy and justice.
Thank you, for the perfect example we have in Jesus Christ.
We are grateful for your reconciling love on the cross
that offers us life in all its fullness.
Thank you, loving God, for helping us to choose life,
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen**

We sing our **Third Hymn: StF 696 For the Healing of the Nations**

[For the healing of the nations. Lyric Video \(StF 696\) - YouTube](#)

<p>1 For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord ; for a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords. To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.</p> <p>2 Lead us forward into freedom ; from despair your world release, that, redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace. Show us how through care and goodness fear will die and hope increase.</p>	<p>3 All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned ; pride of status, race, or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan. In our common quest for justice may we hallow life's brief span.</p> <p>4 You, Creator-God, have written your great name on humankind ; for our growing in your likeness bring the life of Christ to mind ; that by our response and service earth its destiny may find.</p> <p>Fred Kaan (1929–2009)</p>
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The Peace:

Love the Lord your God, obey him, hold fast to him,

for that means life to you, and peace;
and the peace of the Lord be always with you
and also with you.

David Adams

Prayers of Intercession ending with The Lord's Prayer:

*We are using Psalm 119:1-8 as a way into our prayers for others and ourselves: "...” indicates a brief pause for you/us to offer your/our own prayers in the quietness of your/our hearts: Please say together the words in “**bold print**”*

**Great blessings belong to those who live pure lives!
They follow the Lord's teachings.**

Generous God,
we pray for those who do not yet follow your teachings:
for all those whose growth has been stifled by circumstances...*pause*
For those (particularly children) who are abused, neglected,
criticised and bullied...*pause*

**Great blessings belong to those who follow his rules!
They seek him with all their heart.**

We pray for those who do not yet seek God with all their heart:
Reconciling God, help your church to show them
what it means to seek first your kingdom...*pause*

**Those who seek God do not willfully do wrong.
They follow God's ways.**

We pray for those who do not yet follow your ways:
God of justice, help those in war zones, whose lives
and homes have been destroyed by weapons of destruction,
may they know your loving presence amid the senseless suffering...*pause*

**Lord, you gave us your instructions
and told us to always obey them.**

We pray for those who do not yet know the joy of obeying you:
God of integrity, we pray for those who live by their own standards
with no regards for others...*pause*

**How I wish I could be more faithful
in obeying your laws!
Then I would never feel ashamed
when I look closely at your commands.**

God of all wisdom,
we pray for churches, communities and nations,
where division and prejudice have undermined trust
and where pain and discord go unhealed...*pause*

**Life-giving God,
You offer us life in all its fullness.**

We pray for those suffering from illness,
whose choices have been taken from them...*pause*
Where earthly lives have come to an end,
and people are bereft and in sorrow,
fill their lives with your peace and presence...*pause*
Help us all in our lives on this earth
to choose the path that leads to life everlasting.

**The more I understand how fair your laws are,
the more sincerely I will praise you.
I will obey your laws, so please do not leave me!**
Gracious God, we pray for ourselves,
in every area of our lives
where we have not chosen your ways... *pause*

Thank you, God, for your reconciling love
and your abiding promise to hear and answer our prayer;
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour
who taught his first disciples to pray – 'Our Father... **Amen**
Some words were adapted from Roots Magazine

Let us offer of all our gifts to God: (instrumental) <https://youtu.be/hlWnlHuCRwc>

A Prayer of Dedication of our lives and gifts:

Reconciling God,
who invites us through your Son Jesus Christ
to choose the way of life.
We offer to you all our gifts of money, time and talents,
as a symbol of our gratitude to you.
Please accept our gifts and the offering of our lives,
as a sweet smelling fragrance unto you;
through the same Jesus Christ your Son, and our Saviour. **Amen**

We sing together our Closing Hymn: StF 649: God! When human bonds are broken, words by Fred Kaan (1929-2009) <https://youtu.be/EaYtn-UCNnU>

God, when human bonds are broken and we lack the love or skill to restore the hope of healing, give us grace and make us still. Through that stillness, with your Spirit come into our world of stress, for the sake of Christ forgiving all the failures we confess. You in us are bruised and broken: hear us as we seek release from the pain of earlier living; set us free and grant us peace.	Send us, God of new beginnings, humbly hopeful into life. Use us as a means of blessing: make us stronger, give us faith. Give us faith to be more faithful, give us hope to be more true, give us love to go on learning: God! Encourage and renew!
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The Blessing and Sending Out:

May God help *us/you*

to bring peace and wholeness to the world.
To use *our/your* words and actions to encourage,
our/your hands to heal,
our/your eyes to see as God sees:
and may the blessing of the Trinity,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be always with you. **Amen**

Let us go into the world choosing to live life God's way.
In the name of Christ. Amen