

**Circuit Zoom Service for Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2022, the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Prepared by the Revd. Alan Haine**

**Call to Worship:** This morning the Lord God is saying to us the same thing He said to the people of Israel long ago through His servant Moses. He says: "Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death". As we worship this morning and every day of our lives may we seek the help of our Lord Jesus so that we may choose not evil, but good; not death, but life.

**Hymn: 476 (Singing the Faith)/746 (Hymns & Psalms) One more step along the world I go**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXp1NUULdgc>

<p>1 One more step along the world I go, one more step along the world I go ; from the old things to the new keep me travelling along with you : <i>and it's from the old I travel to the new ; keep me travelling along with you.</i></p> <p>2 Round the corners of the world I turn, more and more about the world I learn ; all the new things that I see you'll be looking at along with me :</p> <p>3 As I travel through the bad and good, keep me travelling the way I should ; where I see no way to go you'll be telling me the way, I know :</p>	<p>4 Give me courage when the world is rough, keep me loving though the world is tough ; leap and sing in all I do, keep me travelling along with you :</p> <p>5 You are older than the world can be, you are younger than the life in me ; ever old and ever new, keep me travelling along with you :</p> <p>Sydney Carter (1915–2004)</p>
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**Prayer of Approach:**

Choosing God, you chose to give up everything and make yourself tiny and vulnerable in the baby Jesus. You chose to challenge injustice and overturn the tables in the Temple. You chose to heal and to comfort and to cry over the city of Jerusalem. You chose to feast and to celebrate, to share bread and wine. You chose to follow a path that led to the foot of a cross. You chose women to witness the dawning of Easter morning.

Guide us in the decisions we make, both the bold and life-changing ones and the small and everyday ones. Help us above all to choose life for ourselves, for those around us, for humanity and for the earth. **Amen.**

**Prayer of Confession:** Father God, when we do make decisions we know that so often we make the wrong ones. Forgive us for all the times when we have chosen to do what suited us instead of what You wanted us to do. Forgive us for all the times we have chosen to do things which made us feel good when we should have thought more about serving others. Forgive us for all the times when we have chosen to hurt others by what we have said or done when we should have made life happier for them. And forgive us for all the times when we have chosen to follow our own way instead of following Jesus. May we know Your forgiveness now and may Jesus help us to make better choices in the future. We ask this in His Name. **Amen.**

**Declaration of Forgiveness:** The Lord Jesus says to each one of us: "You are forgiven. From now on choose not to do wrong, but good."

**People: Amen. Thanks be to God.**

**Collect:** O God, you bear your people ever on your heart and mind. Watch over us in your protecting love, that, strengthened by your grace and led by your Spirit, we may not miss your way for us, but enter into your glory, made ready for all in Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**The Lord's Prayer**

## Reflection: Deciding

It's good to be with you once again thanks to Zoom. I'm glad you have made the choice to share in this service. Have you ever thought how often we have to make choices and choose between different things? Some choices are big and important like what job we want to have or who we're going to marry or if we're going to marry. Other choices are not so big like what are we going to have for dinner or what programme we're going to watch on TV. But the whole time we are choosing. All of us sharing in this service began today by choosing to get up or else we wouldn't be here. Maybe some of us had to be helped to make that choice. After that we had to choose to get dressed, have breakfast, clean teeth and so on.

Here are several choices which we might have to make one day. In each case think about which one of the two possibilities you would want to choose.

The first choice is between using the next six months to go on holiday all round the world with everything paid for or using the same six months to go to school or to work not just for 5 days every week but for 7 days every week. I think most if not all of us would prefer the holiday, wouldn't we?

The second choice is between going to watch your favourite football team or your favourite singer or staying in Church for the next 3 weeks listening to me going on and on talking. That's a very difficult choice, I know, but somehow I think most if not all of you would prefer to go to watch the football or the singer.

The next choice is between going to do what you want to do without thinking about how that might affect other people or going to do things that will help other people even though they will take some of your time and maybe some of your money. I don't know about you, but I hope I would choose to help others, yet I have an awful feeling that in practice I would choose to enjoy myself and not consider other people.

Another choice would be between doing what might make you rich, famous and popular or following Jesus, even if that meant doing things that couldn't possibly make you rich or famous and might even make you unpopular. That is a very difficult choice and we need to think very carefully about it. Later in this service we will be hearing about Jesus telling people very clearly that following Him was not easy and that they needed to think carefully before they decided to follow Him. But those of us who are Christians believe that, even though it can be hard, following Jesus is the best way to live our lives and that we should choose to put that choice before anything else.

Coming to Church and learning more about Jesus should help us to truly make that decision and to go on choosing Jesus all through our lives.

## Hymn: 563 (Singing the Faith)/704 (Hymns & Psalms) O Jesus, I have promised

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU\\_cev2ri90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU_cev2ri90)

1 O Jesus, I have promised  
to serve you to the end ;  
Lord, be for ever near me,  
my master and my friend ;  
I shall not fear the battle  
if you are by my side,  
nor wander from the pathway  
if you will be my guide.

2 O let me feel you near me ;  
the world is ever near ;  
I see the sights that dazzle,  
the tempting sounds I hear ;  
my foes are ever near me,  
around me, and within ;  
but, Jesus, now draw nearer,  
and shield my soul from sin.

3 O let me hear you speaking  
in accents clear and still,  
above the storms of passion,  
the murmurs of self-will ;  
O speak to reassure me,  
to hasten or control ;  
Lord, speak, and make me listen,  
O guardian of my soul.

4 O Jesus, you have promised  
to all who follow you,  
that where you are in glory  
your servant shall be too ;  
and, Jesus, I have promised  
to serve you to the end ;  
O give me grace to follow  
my master and my friend.

John Ernest Bode (1816–1874)

**OT Lesson: Deuteronomy 30, verses 15 to 20**

--Introduction: As Moses prepares to leave the people of Israel when he is nearing death, Moses makes it very clear that they have to decide to choose between good and evil, between life and death, between following their own interests and following God’s way. All these hundreds of years later we each face exactly the same choice.

**Responsive Reading: Psalm 1**

Introduction: This is a psalm that suggests that good people are those who choose to follow God’s way which was laid down in the Law God had given through Moses. As Christians we believe that that Law is seen at its best in Jesus and that to follow God’s way means following Jesus wherever He leads.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
**or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;**  
But their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
**and on His law they meditate day and night.**  
They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season;  
**Their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.**  
The wicked are not so;  
**They are like chaff that the wind drives away.**  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
**Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;**  
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
**But the way of the wicked will perish.**

**Gospel: Luke 14, verses 25 to 33 (preferably from the Good News Version)**

Introduction: Jesus makes it clear that there is a cost involved if we become His disciples. We have to understand that cost and be willing to bear it if we really want to follow Jesus.

**Hymn: 672 Where can we find you?  
or 708 (Hymns & Psalms) Believe not those who say**

<p>1 Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master ? We want to serve you, to answer your call. Where do you lead us and ask us to follow ? What should we do in our service to all ?</p> <p>2 ‘Go to the hungry, to those who have nothing ; go where the farmlands are empty and bare. I broke the bread for the people around me ; out of my plenty, think what you can share.</p> <p>3 ‘Go to the homeless, to those who have nowhere ; go where my people sleep out in the rain. I had no comforts but what others gave me ; offer them shelter, give ease to their pain.</p>	<p>4 ‘Go to the outcast, to those who have no-one ; go where my sheep are rejected and lost. I dined with sinners and reached out to lepers ; go and do likewise, and don’t count the cost.’</p> <p>5 Where will we find you, Lord Jesus our Master ? We are your servants who answer your call. You go before us, and there we will follow, taking our cross in the service of all.</p> <p>Allan Charles Dickinson (b. 1954)</p>
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**Sermon: Uncomfortable Words**

**Text: St. Luke 14, verses 25-27 (Good News Bible): ‘Once when large crowds of people were going along with Jesus, He turned and said to them, “Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and**

**themselves as well. Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples.”**

“Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin...” I wonder if any of you today who are as ancient as I am can, like me, remember hearing those words over and over again?

They were the words that used to open the story told on the old radio programme “Listen with Mother” which for many years was on every weekday for just 15 minutes at 1.45 in the afternoon.

When I was a little boy (which is a very long time ago because I’ve been 6 feet tall since I was 11), I used to love that programme and would listen to it every day with my mother. There was always a nursery rhyme and then a story before which we were asked if we were sitting comfortably and then another nursery rhyme and then I suppose many children would have an afternoon nap, whilst mother was able to get on and do something else.

Even if you do not remember that programme, I’m sure you will agree that we all prefer to be able to sit comfortably. When we go on a long journey by car or by coach most of us are glad when we can stop for a “comfort break”, so that we can stretch our legs, perhaps have a quick drink and generally make ourselves comfortable. Yes, physically we like to be comfortable, but what about spiritually?

Some of you may remember the old Communion service which was used in most Methodist churches for many years. It was based on the old Church of England service which goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and in it there was a part known as the “Comfortable Words” where the minister would read words from the New Testament beginning “Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him: “Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”....and so on.

We all need to hear comfortable words like those and the comfort they bring is not a false comfort, but real and deep, the greatest comfort of all, because that is what God offers us in His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

But when I hear some of the other things that Jesus says in the Gospels, such as the words of our text, I recognize that Jesus also has some pretty uncomfortable words that He wants us to hear, words that we often prefer to ignore because we find them so hard and challenging.

The words of our text come from the Good News Bible, but the translators have (for good reasons) made those words slightly less uncomfortable than what the original Greek actually says. For in that original (as in most English translations) Jesus said not that those who want to follow Him should love him more than they love the members of their family and themselves, but that they should love Jesus yet hate their father and mother, their wife and children, their brothers and sisters and themselves.

For Jesus to tell us that, that we should hate those close to us and even ourselves is not only hard: it seems totally impossible and goes against God’s command that we should love our neighbours as ourselves.

So it is a relief to turn to the Good News Bible where Jesus’ words are made slightly easier as we are told that we should love Jesus more than we love ourselves and our families. The Good News translators were not just trying to make things easier, but recognizing that Jewish rabbis used often to exaggerate their point in order to drive it home. So the Good News version is probably what Jesus really meant. By saying something even more extreme He was just trying to get people to wake up and really listen and perhaps realize that following Him was never going to be an easy thing. Even if what He really meant was that we should love Him more than those closest to us and ourselves, that is still quite a tall order. It may not be impossible, but it is not in any way easy.

In my reflection earlier in the service and in our reading from Deuteronomy we were thinking about the choices we have to make in life and how vital it is to make the right choice, not least when it comes to our spiritual lives and in choosing to follow the way of life rather than death, the way of goodness rather than the way of evil and to follow Jesus rather than go own way. In the uncomfortable words of our text and in the whole of our Gospel Lesson we are being reminded that it is not easy to follow Jesus. Sometimes evangelists and preachers can so concentrate on the easier words of Jesus and the good things that come from following Him, that we may make it seem as though when someone follows Jesus, all their problems will miraculously disappear and everything will always be all sweetness and light.

Those of you who have been following Jesus for some time will know only too well that that is not true: that because we choose to follow Jesus, that does not mean that we don’t have to face problems. Difficulties come because other people let us down and we also let them down. They come because of

poverty or greed or because of sickness in ourselves and those we love. They come because this world and all of us in it are fallen creatures and because the goodness that God created has to some extent been spoiled.

I can remember when I was 15 years old back in 1966. (That gives my age away, doesn't it?) That was a year when Billy Graham, the great American evangelist, came to this country. It was just after I had been confirmed at my local Church and I went to one of the rallies at Earls Court in London where Billy Graham spoke. At the end of the sermon I went forward and made a commitment to follow Jesus. Many others did the same including some of my schoolfriends, but some of them did not retain their commitment. There were various reasons for that, but in some cases it was because they had not realized that following Jesus is not easy and does not mean that all our problems disappear: on the contrary, as we heard at the end of the text, Jesus calls us to the hard task not only of loving Him more than ourselves, but also of taking up the cross behind Him, and being willing sometimes to suffer because we are His friends

In our text Jesus reminds us that it is not easy to follow Him, but then He goes on to suggest that we should weigh up the risks of following Him before we take the plunge. Perhaps if those schoolfriends of mine had been invited to do that, some of them would never have made a commitment to follow Jesus in the first place, but maybe some of them would have gone into it in a wiser way and might have grown into deeper faith as they came to see that there are risks and hardships in following Jesus as well as the joy that in the end surpasses all other joys.

I always find that I need to preach my sermons to myself. I need to hear them as much as anybody else, perhaps more than anybody else, and not only hear them but take note of what (I hope) God is saying through them. If I am honest I am not a person who likes taking any risks and I often find myself saying, "I think, to be on the safe side, we should...."

For example that we should take our raincoats with us even when the forecast is for sunshine for days ahead or that we should not risk doing anything scary like going on a helter-skelter or a roller coaster or taking a ride in a hot air balloon. A minister in one of my previous circuits had always wanted a ride in a hot air balloon and his congregation gave him a trip in one as a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday present. He really enjoyed it, but I would run a mile if anybody tried to give me that sort of present. When I have thought about my ministry, I have sometimes preferred to do safe things, things I'm used to instead of journeying in faith to something tricky and more risky.

So I need to hear this sermon I'm preaching today because in our Gospel Jesus does not say that we should never take risks. Instead He tells us that before we take the risk, we should consider if it is something that is actually possible for us at all and, if it is, whether the risk is worthwhile or simply stupid. The modern expression for doing this that we hear so often nowadays is taking a "risk assessment". We are supposed to take regular "risk assessments" on our churches and to check in case there are dangers that people coming onto our premises might face. Stairs are a particular area we need to keep in good repair, so that people can enter and leave the premises safely. Of course, whilst it is important that we do what we can to keep our premises safe, however much we do there will always still be risks of someone falling or having an accident, but at least we can do what we can to think about the risks and cut them to a minimum.

That is just what those people did to whom Jesus referred in the Gospel reading. Anyone building a tower needs to make sure they have enough money and resources to finish the job or it will be a waste of time and money even starting. Sometimes as I've travelled around our country I have seen towers built by wealthy people in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: towers with no other buildings around them and which have come to be called "follies" because these people ran out of money before they could build anything else, so they left behind no castle or palace. What they had done was just folly and stupidity.

Have any of you been to Liverpool? Liverpool has 2 cathedrals, one Church of England and one Roman Catholic. The Church of England one took many years to complete and is absolutely huge whilst the Catholic one opened in 1967 is much smaller. But when I went to Liverpool I was taken to see another site just down the road where the Catholic Cathedral was originally started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A huge crypt was built and if that building had been finished it would have been even bigger than the Anglican one. But they ran out of money and in the early 1960's the Archbishop of Liverpool decided to abandon the project and build a much smaller one. That was surely a wise decision and I believe that Cathedral is still the biggest Catholic one in England.

Then Jesus also talks about kings taking thought before they go to war in case they don't have enough troops to be sure of winning. If necessary they need to make peace rather than face almost certain disaster.

But the likes of you and I are not going to be able to do something big like spending money building castles or cathedrals or forming armies or navies. No, Jesus used illustrations like that to make us realize just how big a thing it is to follow Him. As our American cousins say, it is something “awesome” and we cannot make light of the risk Jesus calls us to take in following Him or its likely cost. He even talks at the end of the passage in another highly uncomfortable saying of giving up everything we have to follow Him. Again perhaps we should not take that absolutely literally and maybe here once more Jesus is really saying that we should be ready to use what we have in His service and not keep everything for ourselves. Yet that is once again a heavy cost and a big risk.

And many people today say that this and all the risks involved in following Jesus are too great to be borne. Some of them even say that to take such a risk would be completely stupid. Back in 2010 there was a startling headline in my newspaper one day: “God did not create the universe—Stephen Hawking”. That great physicist who had previously been non-committal about whether or not God could have created the universe then said quite categorically that God couldn’t and that the laws of physics made this quite impossible. If that is so, then it would seem to me that to choose God and to choose to take any risks to follow Jesus is a complete waste of time and something stupid. Some of the militant atheists took what Stephen Hawking said as an invitation to renew their attacks on the Christian faith.

Now I do not profess to understand physics or Stephen Hawking’s arguments, but I do know that some other physicists are not convinced by what he said. I may be a person who doesn’t like taking risks, but I still believe that the risk involved in choosing God and following Jesus is not completely stupid or irrational and that it is worthwhile. The day following Hawking’s article there was another wonderful article in the same paper by Jonathan Sacks who was then the Chief Rabbi in this country. Although we Christians may have our differences in what we believe with the Jewish people, we also have a lot in common and, of course, Jesus Himself was a Jew. Jonathan Sacks wrote that the question that Stephen Hawking did not even attempt to answer is “Why did the world come into being?”. But that is a question that people of faith do ask and most of them continue to find the best answer to be that God has done it because of love and a desire to create. It is in our faith that we can find an answer to that question and science is not really concerned with that question at all.

Some militant atheists may attempt to undermine our faith, but let us not forget what happened in Soviet Russia. When Lenin and the Communists came to power in 1917, they too were militant atheists and treated religion of any sort as a thing of the past. They tried to stamp out all religions including the Christian faith, but the more they tried to do that, the more many people in Russia found that there was a God-shaped blank in their lives. Something was missing and they knew that that something was God. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, it emerged just how strong was the faith of those in the churches of Russia. Some religious folk had been willing to take great risks whilst the Communists were in charge and, although they could never reach high positions in any field because they were believers, they still went on believing: they still went on taking the risk of faith because they felt that risk was more than worthwhile.

So today Jesus invites all of us to be His followers: to choose God and to choose Jesus, but only after we have thought about it carefully and decided the risk is one worth taking. I believe that despite all the difficulties involved in loving Jesus more than we love ourselves and those closest to us and all the hardships that come when we put God before our possessions, that the risk is worth taking and is not something stupid. No, we don’t have to leave our brains outside when we come to Church and stop using them so that we can believe what other people see as senseless. Instead we can use our brains and still conclude that there is a God who loves us and who through Jesus invites us to be with Him, no matter what the difficulties. And in the end, I hope that you can join me in bowing before this God and renewing your commitment to the Lord Jesus as you worship today. For ultimately the thing that makes me bow in wonder above everything else is not that I can believe in God and in Jesus, but that God can believe in me, with all my faults and failings. Surely that is the wonder at the heart of our faith, a wonder that I hope all of us can share. For it is only because of that, because of God’s love for each and every one of us that in the end we can sit comfortably, we can have hope, we can have faith and, above all, we can have love.

**Hymn: 673 (Singing the Faith) Will you come and follow me?  
or 250) Singing the Faith)/141 (Hymns & Psalms) Jesus calls us!**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zk6IUalJ3sk>

<p>1 Will you come and follow me if I but call your name ? Will you go where you don't know and never be the same ? Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known, will you let my life be grown in you and you in me ?</p> <p>2 Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name ? Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same ? Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare ? Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me ?</p> <p>3 Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name ? Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same ? Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen, and admit to what I mean in you and you in me ?</p>	<p>4 Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name ? Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same ? Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around, through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me ?</p> <p>5 Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name. Let me turn and follow you and never be the same. In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show. Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.</p> <p>John L. Bell (<i>b.</i> 1949) and Graham Maule (<i>b.</i> 1958)</p>
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### **Prayers of Intercession & Thanksgiving:**

The response is:

Minister: Lord, in Your mercy.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

Let us pray first for our own local Church and for the Methodist Church throughout this country as the Church begins another New Year in its life. We remember especially all those ministers starting this week in new Circuits and Churches as they face new challenges and new tasks and they and their families have to settle in new surroundings. But we pray also for all Methodists and for everyone who has a link with our own Church that, as we start a New Year we may each be clear that we really want to follow Jesus despite the cost because we believe that following Him is the only way to enjoy life in all its fullness.

Minister: Lord, in Your mercy.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

Then at this troubled time and as we remember the continuing war in Ukraine, let us pray for world leaders that they may never take unnecessary risks with the lives of the people of their own nation and other nations, but instead may pause before they venture into warfare and conflict. We pray for peace and reconciliation wherever there is discord. We also ask that world leaders may not back away from hard decisions that need to be made in areas like dealing with climate change.

Minister: Lord, in Your mercy.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for our own nation and for the appointment of a new Prime Minister that the one appointed may be someone who does not take unnecessary risks, but who is willing to move forwards with integrity and a genuine concern for all the people of our country. We think particularly of those who are finding it hard to

make ends meet at the moment and pray that both those in authority and those with more of this world's goods may do what is best to help them.

Minister: Lord, in Your mercy.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

We remember too those who are sick or sad or worried at the moment and pray that they may find help and comfort, May each of us be ready to do what we can to help and may those with faith who are faced with troubles be enabled to go on following Jesus through hardships, pain and even death. We remember especially any who have asked for our prayers or who are on our minds at the moment.....

Minister: Lord, in Your mercy.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

Finally, we pray that we may each be ready to take the risks involved in having true faith in Jesus Christ. May the sense that we are cared for by Christ and held in His loving arms enable us to follow His way and to choose His life, the life that will never come to an end.

Minister: Lord, in Your mercy.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

We bring all our prayers in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Hymn: 557 (Singing the Faith)/698 (Hymns & Psalms) Let Him to whom we now belong**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqQ1soGMdGs>

<p>1 Let him to whom we now belong his sovereign right assert, and take up every thankful song and every loving heart.</p> <p>2 He justly claims us for his own, who bought us with a price ; the Christian lives to Christ alone, to Christ alone he dies.</p>	<p>3 Jesus, thine own at last receive, fulfil our hearts' desire, and let us to thy glory live, and in thy cause expire.</p> <p>4 Our souls and bodies we resign ; with joy we render thee our all, no longer ours, but thine to all eternity.</p> <p>Charles Wesley (1707–1788)</p>
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**The Blessing:** May the God who chooses to create and to sustain life go with us as we choose to care for creation. May the Son who chooses to see the potential of life in the outcast and the stranger go with us as we choose to see the potential of life in each person we meet. May the Spirit who intercedes for us go with us as we choose to take the risk of following Jesus now and into the days ahead. Amen.