**1st March 2015**

**Matthew 7.13-29**

Leonard Nimoy who played Spock in Star Trek died a couple of days ago. Live long and prosper was his Vulcan greeting.

A minister was talking about how to have a happy life and decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon.

  Four worms were placed into four separate jars.
 The first worm was put into a container of alcohol.
 The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke.
 The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup.
 The fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil.

 At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results:

 The first worm in alcohol - Dead.
The second worm in cigarette smoke - Dead
Third worm in chocolate syrup - Dead
Fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive.

 So the Minister asked the congregation - What can you learn from this demonstration about how to have a good life?

A woman sat at the back, quickly raised her hand and said,
 "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

To live long and prosper I would say follow Jesus. But following him is taking a narrow way. Jesus in this teaching sets out two paths and issues many warnings about keeping on the right path. Like a succession of road signs on the motorway these three warnings try and keep you concentrating, taking note of danger and realising that you can’t presume on anything so keep your wits about you.

These three warnings are basically: make sure you go through the gate – it’s not very wide. Watch out for who may lead you off the road! Don’t think that because you’ve been tagging along with others that you’ll get there in the end – those who are more likely to get there in the end are those who put into practice what they have learnt.

All these warnings are sharp and worrying. We need to take them seriously.

**First the narrow gate**. The old walled city of Jerusalem had several gates. Some were quite wide to let several people go in and out all at once. Some were quite narrow so that only one person could through at a time. Jesus sets his face against any deal that you can simply go with the flow, allowing the crowd to set the pace and the direction.

Most people in our society want to conform – they want to fit in. they don’t want the aggro of looking the odd one out. If you follow Jesus that’s not going to be an option. In a crowd of people all milling around, maybe going in different directions – you have pledged to keep your eyes on him. Where is Jesus going? What would Jesus do?

There comes a point in all our lives when we have to reach a decision. What job to take, what university to choose, who to marry. In a trial by jury the judge at the end of the trial will ask the jury ‘have you reached a verdict?’ At the end of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus has spelt out what it means to follow him he says its decision time. It is time to reach a verdict.

Throughout the gospels the writers make it clear that there is no more important issue in life than whether you have made a decision to follow Jesus Christ. The sooner you make that decision hopefully the trajectory of the rest of your life will be more blessed. It is the testimony of many of you here who came to real faith in Jesus Christ later in life that you wished you had found him earlier – if you had known him earlier perhaps you wouldn’t have done this or that.

It is one of the most important things if not the most important things we do as a church – share the message of Jesus and encourage others to find faith in him. We can do that in all sorts of way. We have just started a Christianity Explored Course at the Bank café – which gives a great venue for informal relaxed conversations and discussion about who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. Please don’t waste that opportunity to invite friend’s family.

If you are not sure about following Jesus come on the course – give yourself this time to consider fully – to reach your verdict.

Have you ever heard someone say that Christianity is too narrow-minded? You should be open minded, broad minded. Why set boundaries. Live a life of ease without having to keep the standards of Jesus. You can be proud, dishonest and angry; you can hate your enemy, have sex with who you like and be full of lust. You do not need to forgive and you need never pray or give. You can abuse your body. You can hold your money and you can be ambitious only for yourself. If someone does you wrong, you can retaliate as much as you like and criticize others to your hearts content.

The problem with this road – this broad road of no boundaries of doing what you please is that people get hurt. We all recognize that children need boundaries or else they end up as spoilt brats. One of the reasons you may bring your children to church is because we follow these ‘narrow’ teachings of Jesus. We sometimes forget that adults can be spoilt brats too. The result of a broad road is that people get hurt. My freedom to drive dangerously means that someone may get injured or killed.

The narrow way is harder – but it leads to life. So many times in life we avoid the problem, the issue because we don’t want the pain involved - but then we miss out on real growth and life and the problems don’t get fixed and lead us to destruction.

The narrow path leads to life. Do you believe that? Will you make a decision for that way – will you enter that narrow gate?

I am no DIY expert. Once I was planeing a piece of wood and splinters were flying everywhere and I kept snagging until my dad pointed out that you should always plane with the grain not against the grain. Jesus is here asking us to go against the grain. Expect opposition. Expect the temptation to take the easy option: the course of less resistance. That’s why you need to consider your verdict well and then stick to it.

We live in an age of pluralism and the suggestion that there is only one way to God is not popular to the modern ear – but that is the claim of Jesus. He reveals to us what God is like and the way of God, the love of God, the passion of God. We have to decide what to make of it and reach a verdict.

But then as soon as someone says you have a real choice to make to follow Jesus Christ – you may hear a little voice saying ‘maybe Jesus didn’t mean it – surely he can’t have been that strict – maybe it will come right in the end no matter what we do’. Then you need the next warning.

**The next warning, in line with biblical instructions, is against ‘false prophets’**. Watch out for who may lead you off the narrow road. In ancient Israel false prophets were people who claimed to be speaking the word of God but actually weren’t. If people listened to them they would end up going the wrong way, and disaster would follow. But the trouble with false prophets is of course that they seem very nice, very reasonable, and very trustworthy. No wolf is going to let you see his caws and teeth if he can dress himself up as a harmless sheep – and that’s what they will do.

In the Old Testament, the test for true and false prophets was wait and see! If the prophet tells you that something is going to happen, you will discover whether they are truthful by seeing whether it does.

Jesus has a more graphic and perhaps quicker method of detection. Look at the life of the person who is offering you advice. Think of it like a tree. Can you see healthy tasty fruit on this tree?

What fruit are we looking for?

Maybe the fruit of character? Don’t look at the outward appearances. Like sheep clothing they may look good – say the right things maybe have some flashy gifts – yet what about the fruit of their character. Think of the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These characteristic you should expect to see growing in a person who’s a true Christian. We will never find perfection of curse. Some of us start further back and need more time but you should ask are there fundamental flaws in the characters of the leaders: do they have a disturbing arrogance, a self-centeredness, a lack of conscience and integrity, a sophisticated ability to manipulate the vulnerable, or control others and get angry when people disobey them or don’t do what they say or believe what they tell them to believe?

Of course leaders, as sheep sometimes go astray from the good path. When it happens they need to repent and be forgiven and try again. This is different from deliberately setting out to deceive.

Later in Mathew’s gospel Jesus uses the image of fruitfulness in relation to what people say and the truth of it. (Matthew 12). Can you see other people being genuinely nourished by it? Or is it, in fact, producing a crop of lies, immorality, control, oppression. Greed?

What is the long term influence of their ministry? The main questions to ask about the sermon is not ‘are they intellectually stimulating, or did he tell any good stories’ – but ‘are they bringing people closer to God? That may involve you feeling challenged and uncomfortable – because the teaching of Jesus sometimes did that.

We need to weigh the words of anyone who claims to speak on behalf of God against what we know to be the word of God. How do the words of the prophet stand up against the teaching of scripture?

Though of course this sometimes needs great discernment.

William Wilberforce was denounced as a false prophet for leading the anti-slavery campaign in the early 19th century. His detractors pointed out that slavery was tolerated in the scripture.

Both Old and New Testaments contain regulations about slavery. The regulations were about their time and place. But did they hold the same meaning for the present. Some Christians like William Wilberforce him felt that other, more general principles taught by scripture (about equality, love, justice, human dignity and so on) made the slavery passages no longer applicable.

Were they relativizing the gospel saying it only applied then but not now? The word relative is often taken to have a negative meaning when it is applied to beliefs. We sense it means ‘not important’ or even ‘not true’ – so we all say dismissively ‘it’s all relative’. But relative has a positive meaning – it means ‘related to’. In the context of our faith, and working out what is the narrow gate compared with the wide gate, relative means how our spiritual ancestors saw things. This language, the language of the bible and the early Christian tradition is related to their time and place, their then.

To recognise it as relative does not mean is has no importance for our time – far from it. But it does change the question. The question is no longer simply ‘what does the \Bible say’ as if that would settle everything by reading it literally and then saying well that means that for us today. Rather the question becomes ‘given what their words meant for them then, what might their meaning be for our now.’

Today I don’t know any Christians who think that we should re-establish slavery, because passages in the Bible say it’s all right. Christians have relativized that teaching, recognising it as being about their then (and maybe even wrong in their then).

‘What does the Bible say’ is not always a straightforward question. God is often portrayed in the Bible as violent, vindictive, punitive, as well as compassionate, forgiving, gracious merciful. WE follow Jesus, because the early Christians believed that he was the full revelation of what God was like. What Jesus did was what God would do; the priorities Jesus had, where the priorities of God. Jesus is the norm -the narrow way of interpreting scripture. He is the Word of God, made flesh that helps us understand the written word of God. When the Bible and what we see in Jesus conflict and sometimes they do, we need to be discerning and go with Jesus – if we hold true that he is the full revelation of God and that in him we see more clearly the passion and character of God. It narrows it down. Follow his way.

Remember that Jesus was regarded as a false prophet by the religious rulers of his day. He was crucified as a false messiah. These words are applied to himself.

**The final warning in this sequence moves our attention to what will happen in the future. When the storms of life come – will you have firm foundations? When you face the moment of judgement will you know the Lord, or rather be known by the Lord?**

What does the future hold in store for us? We all have our dreams and hopes, our aspirations and longings. Futurologists predict what will happen. In 1876 the British Post Office said that the Americans have need of the telephone but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys. In 1943 Thomas Watson of IBM said there is no reason why anyone would want a computer in their own home. The Beatles were rejected by Décor records in 1962 ‘we don’t like their music and guitars are on their way out.’

Jesus tells us that our decisions will affect our future. Which road are we on broad or narrow? Whom will we follow: the true or false prophets? Now finally he requires that we choose what we will base our lives on: rock or sand: a metaphor for hearing and doing.

The storms of life will come in many forms: misunderstandings, disappointments, doubts, trials, attacks. Success to can be a test. There will be pressures, setbacks, illness, suffering bereavement, trauma tragedy failure ultimately death and God’s judgement. However we need not live in fear. It is not easy but there is a sure way that when the foundations of our house are tested they stand the test. It is possible to know that our future is secure.

The word for foolish in Greek literally means someone who does not stop and think. Jesus encourages us to think – especially about the foundational questions about the meaning of life, why we ae here, what is the point and whether we know whether our plans are right or wrong.

Leslie Newbigin tells the story of how at a scout camp decades ago a new substance was unleashed on the world called Shredded wheat. It was issued as rations but within an hour there was complaint from the camp: from one of the scouts: ‘these pan scrubbers are useless’.

Until we know the purpose of something, we cannot tell whether or not it is any use. God’s purpose is for us to live in relationship with him. Once we realise that everything else makes sense.

May God help us all to build on the rock of Christ. As you intentionally work at these teachings of Jesus, and follow the way of Jesus – it’s like going through the narrow gate – difficult, and not easy, compared with unthinkingly going along with the crowd. But trust that it will lead to life and not destruction.