

20:20 Vision – Priorities

Gen.2.15-17 / Matthew 4.1-11

I think I may have told you before that when I was a Vicar in Yorkshire, we had a gallery at the back of our large church. On Christmas morning, as people turned to go out of church, we heaved hundreds of balloons over the balcony, all inscribed with the word ‘Joy’. And what we taught not only the children but the adults was that Christmas joy comes from having those three letters in place – J for Jesus, O for Others, and Y for yourself. If we live with those priorities, we will have joy. If, as maybe some do, we put ourselves first, others second and Jesus third, we have Yoj, which doesn’t sound so good. Of course that principle doesn’t only apply at Christmas!

The story we have just heard is, amongst other things, a story about the priorities Jesus had. It might have seemed reasonable for him to ensure he was not hungry, so that he had the energy to fulfil his mission. It might have seemed reasonable for him to do something spectacular which would ensure people listened to what he had to say. It might have seemed reasonable to have authority over the world. But his priorities were different, and were costly. He needed angelic comfort at the end of those temptations.

So one way of approaching getting a 20:20 vision for ourselves, as we are trying to do this Lent, is to look at what our priorities are, and how we reach them. Having priorities means making choices. And unlike the stark choice we heard about in the OT lesson, where Adam can either obey or disobey, doing the right thing or the wrong thing, most of the time for us it is a matter of making choices between things which may *all* be right, in one way or another. But we can’t do them *all*. We have to choose. And making choices is something we find in many Bible stories. Think of Moses setting out the choices for the people of Israel, and asking them to choose life. Or Joshua making much the same challenge to the people gathered at Shechem. Jesus poses a choice for the rich young man who wants to follow him. He says Mary Magdalene makes the right choice in coming to listen to him, and on another occasion pouring expensive ointment over his feet. That last one is particularly interesting, because the disciples point out that the value of that ointment would have

done much to feed the poor. But Jesus commends her choice, and tells them they will always have the poor with them, but they won't have him. The disciples had a valid point, but there were choices to be made – and not obvious ones.

Because we are given freedom to choose, we have to work at this. I'll come to us as individuals in a few minutes. But think of the issues for politicians: whether at international, national or local level there are so many things that need to be done. If there was all the money in the world, we could tackle the issues of international poverty, care for the elderly in our own country and the need to improve the Health service, and improve education, *and* do the really important things like filling in the potholes! But at every level, those who have to make the decisions have to prioritise. What is the most important thing, what are the other important things, what are the lesser issues? In ten days time we will see what priorities the government reveals in the budget.

Think of the issues for the church, either nationally or locally. How do we cope with the two-fold command from Jesus to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves? How much – not only money – but time and energy do we give to the maintenance of our buildings? Archbishop Carey was blunt: 'The church is not in the business of maintaining buildings: we're in the job for promoting the values of Christ and the Gospel.' It is a huge issue in many of the village parishes in this Diocese. It's not only buildings. I tremble at the amount of time I have had to spend over the years dealing with internal church issues, which in the longer term now seem to be quite unimportant. But the priorities were those handed down to me by Bishops, or Synods, or whatever. I threatened to resign from my last parish when some members of the PCC tried to abolish the commitment to give 10% of our income to causes outside the parish. It would have been less of an issue for me if the parish hadn't got getting on for a quarter of a million in its accounts. Today is St David's Day. Four hundred years after his death, the then Bishop of St David's wrote of him 'Everywhere voices are raised to heaven in prayer; everywhere the virtues are constantly brought back to the bosom of the church; everywhere charitable offerings are with open hands distributed to the needy.' Not a bad set of priorities for churches to copy!

To some extent, these priorities, national or ecclesiastical are beyond us. What is always the case is that we can make our own priorities, in how we spend our time, our energy, our money. What drives making those priorities? They will of course change from time to time. In terms of our time, for

example, if we have a young family, or aged relatives to care for, the demands they make on the priorities of our time and energy are different from when those children grow up, or our elders shuffle off this mortal coil. The constraints on our priorities in spending will be different if we are suddenly unemployed, for example. No-one can have a definitive list of priorities which will always be clear. There will be conflicting demands which are all equally right in themselves, but which we cannot respond to equally, because we have only a certain amount of time or energy or cash.

Maybe we have to test our priorities? Let's go back to the budget, which we will have in the week after next. When we hear those decisions, what is our first reaction? If we are honest, it is likely to be 'How does this affect me – will I be better off or worse off?' It maybe a little later that we consider how the decisions affect others. That is because we are innately self-centred, like Adam and Eve in our story this morning. As the old fashioned preachers used to say SIN is a three letter word with I in the middle of it. But to change that innate priority takes a great deal. Dag Hammarskjold, the General Secretary of the UN all those years ago said 'Your life is without foundation if, in any matter, you choose on your own behalf.' We Christians dare to say that (in the words of the hymn) 'Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone.' So in a sense it comes back to my Christmas balloons. How can our priorities be summed up? JOY – Jesus first, others second, yourself last. Or YOJ – Yourself first, other second, and Jesus last. Part of our Lenten task of trying to get 20:20 vision is getting our priorities right.