

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, year 'A'
12 February 2023
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In our reading this morning from Deuteronomy, Moses is giving a kind of farewell speech—which is also a warning—to the people of ancient Israel before they crossed over into the Promised Land and into the great unknown and uncertain future of God. He says to them “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” But it’s not much of a choice—is it?—between life and death. Who of us wouldn’t choose life, especially since none of us is programmed to give up and give in easily? We need only think about the stories of heroic and heart-breaking rescue efforts in Turkey and Syria in aftermath of the recent earthquakes. People were determined not to give up, were desperately looking for life even amidst death and destruction.

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” Now, we’re not in the midst of death and adversity like the people of Turkey and Syria and Ukraine are. In fact, if ever there was a people that has not only chosen life, but also knows how to live, it’s us. Where once it could be said that people lived to work, it can now be said that we work to live. We have chosen life with a vengeance and have become prosperous beyond our wildest imaginings. We’re people of life and well-being.

So why do so many of us feel empty? Why are so many of us still trying to find meaning and worth? Maybe it’s because even though we live in a world of unprecedented material prosperity, at the heart of our culture there’s a grave and disquieting anxiety. We work hard and we play hard because we dare not stop, lest we’re forced to confront the fact that we’re living on the edge of a volcano—or on top of a powder keg. What else to do in the wake of such stark truths, but to choose the life which plays out in eating, drinking and being merry? For tomorrow we die, maybe even from the things which make life well, liveable.

The cruel irony of our times is that the things which claim to be the very essence of the good life, things which we have poured our aspirations, our desires, our hopes into are killing us. In the absence of real communities, we speak of “virtual communities”. Even though we are disconnected from one another and ourselves, we can be connected to the world in the touch of key. We know infinitely more than our grandparents do but our perception is likewise poorer. Anything we desire can be had, but our wants are never filled.

Like the Israelites of old you and I stand with a vast chasm of uncertainty before us and like every generation who, when faced with the birth of new ideas, new systems, new beliefs, are afraid and seek the solace of the familiar and customary, the diverting

and attractive, and have made these things our Gods. But in doing so we have chosen death and adversity over life and prosperity. Our idol-Gods may glisten and seduce and give comfort—and even for a time seem to bring success—but they tarnish, disenchant and grow cold. They neither hear nor answer and beneath their smiling mask of life is the leering face of death.

It's undeniably true that the God who summons us to life has none of the immediate appeal of these more seductive—albeit transitory and feckless—deities, which is no doubt why we so easily turn away from him and toward those which are easier and more attractive. A God who is none other than the crucified Christ is one which is difficult to embrace, let alone follow.

Nevertheless, it is this Crucified God who asks you and me to trust in the promise of new life which he freely gives. Yet it's a promise that's only realized on the other side of the wilderness. Now, ours is an existential wilderness unlike the physical one the ancient Israelites wandered in. It's a wilderness in which we are asked to plumb the depths of our own and collective lives, to find the courage to forsake all the things we have known, loved, sought after, contrived—and even assumed to be the very essence of the good life—as we make our journey.

Annibale Carracci, one of the masters of the Italian baroque school, painted a canvas which portrayed the story of the Choice of Hercules. In it a vigorous and heroic Hercules is depicted with two women flanking him who represent the two destinies which were before him: the woman on the left is Virtue pointing to the difficult path leading to glory through suffering, while the woman on the right is Pleasure who points to the easy path which leads to disgrace through comfort.

The same choices are set before us: the choice to worship the phony and worthless Gods of our own devising and determination rather than the true and mighty God of the Cross. The choice to live only for diversion and excitement rather than meaning and substance. The choice to turn back from the unknown wilderness before us rather than walk into its uncertain terrain. The choice to choose the death which masquerades as life rather than the life which seems like death. The choice is yours; it's mine. But the promise that those who dare to journey through the wilderness will find a bright future and fuller life—that promise is God's.