

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Do the next thing

Presented by Harry Goodhew

INTRODUCTION

Some 50 years ago, in 1956, to be exact, five young American missionaries died in the jungles of Eastern Ecuador. They'd planned to share the message of Jesus with a previously unreached tribe. But, sadly, misunderstanding their intentions, the tribesmen speared them to death.

Jim Elliot was one of those five. His young wife Elisabeth and their small daughter later returned to that same tribe and lived and worked amongst them. The five certainly didn't die in vain. Back in the year 2000 I saw at least one of those involved in that killing, and others from that tribe, who had all become followers of Jesus.

Jim Elliot's wife Elisabeth later became a writer and speaker of note and it's something I heard her say that I would like to share with you after this music

SEGMENT 1

Elisabeth is a very impressive woman and what she says is always worth hearing but what stayed with me was in fact something she quoted. The author of the piece is not known, and I am sure others have used it before. Indeed you may, yourself, have heard it, but because it was new to me and spoke to me I would like to read it for you. The piece in question is called "DO THE NEXT THING."

So, here it is. Are you ready?

From an old English parsonage, down by the sea
 There came in the twilight a message to me,
 Its quaint Saxon legend deeply engraven,
 Hath, as it seems to me, teaching from Heaven.
 And on through the hours, quiet words ring
 Like a low inspiration-
 DO THE NEXT THING!

Many a questioning, many a fear,
 Many a doubt, hath its quieting here,
 Moment by moment, let down from Heaven,
 Time, opportunity, guidance, are given.
 Fear not tomorrows, Child of the King,
 Trust them with Jesus,
 DO THE NEXT THING!

Do it immediately, do it with prayer;
 Do it reliantly, casting all care;
 Do it with reverence, tracing His Hand
 Who placed it before thee with earnest command.
 Stayed on Omnipotence, safe 'neath His wing,
 Leave all resultings,
 DO THE NEXT THING!

Looking to Jesus, ever serener
 (Working or suffering) be thy demeanour,
 In His dear presence, the rest of His calm,
 The light of His countenance be thy balm
 Strong in His faithfulness, praise and sing,
 Then as he beckons thee
 DO THE NEXT THING!

I think there is a lot of wisdom here. Guidance can be a difficult issue. “Which way should I turn? What should I do now?” There are of course many instances in the Bible and in life generally, of God, giving individuals very clear and specific directions. But for most of the time the idea of ‘doing the next thing’ is a useful guide in making choices. Even an outstanding figure like Abraham, to whom God spoke directly on a number of occasions still needed during the years that intervened to make significant decisions without the benefit of any special guidance.

Let’s think about it a little more in a moment.

SEGMENT 2

The desire to please God and to do his will in daily life is the character of the life to which we are called, if we own Jesus as our Lord and Master. So how do we go about determining from day to day what his will is for us?

The first and continuing step in doing the will of God is to pray, to pray that God will enable us to do his will, and to ask Him to work in us to will and to do his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13), We are to pray for a heart that is genuinely set to love and honour God in all our ways and for a mind that can discern what that might mean in any given situation. Paul tells his friends in Philippi that he prays for them that just those capacities may grow in them more and more. (Philippians 1:9-11)

Anglicans, in their Book of Common Prayer, have a prayer that says, “O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Something along those lines is a good prayer to offer up each and every day.

If we are learning to love what God loves and genuinely desiring that which he promises, then we are already moving in the path of his will. But where do we learn what God loves and what he promises? The answer is of course, the Bible: God’s own revelation of his will and purpose. That is why thoughtful daily Bible reading and prayer are so important. They are a fundamental means by which our minds are trained to think the way God would have us think and therefore act the way he would have us act. The Bible is the tool that the Spirit of God uses to build in us a Christian mind and Christian character and hence to promote those actions that please God.

At the heart of God's guidance for us are the twin directives that Jesus gave us as a summary of the character of life in his kingdom. First, we are to love God with our whole being, and along with that, we are to love others as we love ourselves. (Matthew 22:37-40). But how are we to give legs to those twin directives as we face the choices that life demands of us day by day? Without a direct voice from heaven telling us what to do in every situation, what are we to do?

That is where; it seems to me, that our poem about "Doing the next thing" comes into operation, but more of that in a moment.

Segment 3

There are moments that come to us all when 'doing the next thing' seems to be the problem. We simply do not know what the 'next thing' should be. We stand at a fork in the road of life and ask "Do I go to the right, or do I go to the left?" Which way is God's way for me in this situation?

It is here that I think the poem has some wisdom: "Moment by moment, let down from Heaven, time, opportunity, guidance, are given", it says. And they are. God may indeed give some very clear indication but if that sort of guidance is not apparent to us at the time we are certainly not left without directions as to how we might proceed. Maybe a moment has come when God is giving us an opportunity to exercise the heart and mind that He has developed us to determine and pursue his purposes. If so then we are to give thought to how we might discern what that "next thing" is.

For example, I can ask myself: "What does my mind and conscience shaped by Scripture and prayer, suggest I should do?" Or, "What do love for God and my neighbour suggest my duty might be in this situation?" Or, "What choice will I be happiest to explain to my Lord when I meet him face to face?" And, "What do wise friends think about the path I should take?"

In my experience, in the midst of these sorts of considerations, a moment comes when something presents itself that requires action: a 'next thing' occurs and something has to be done. That is the time to trust God and do the 'next thing': make the choice, take the action, speak the word.

Is it possible for me to make a mistake and take a wrong path? Well, maybe, but remember God is God, and he is not fazed, even by our honestly made, and sometimes, our not so honestly made, so called 'mistakes'. If we are genuinely seeking to please him we can trust him with our decisions and be at peace.

As the poem says,

Do it immediately, do it with prayer;
Do it reliantly, casting all care;
Do it with reverence, tracing His Hand
Who placed it before thee with earnest command.
Stayed on Omnipotence, safe 'neath His wing,
Leave all resultings.
DO THE NEXT THING!

That's it: "stayed" or "reliant" on Omnipotence and safe beneath His wings we are to leave the outcomes of our choices to him just as we leave our souls well being in his almighty hands.

CLOSE

To conclude, let me repeat for you the poem's last stanza.

Looking to Jesus, ever serener
(working or suffering) be thy demeanour,
In His dear presence, the rest of His calm,
The light of His countenance be thy balm
Strong in His faithfulness, praise and sing,
Then as he beckons thee:
DO THE NEXT THING!

God be with you.