

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Lifestyle choices

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

If you had to come up with one word to describe your life, what would it be? My life is wonderful?.....ordinary?.....disappointing?.....difficult?

Someone said to me once, "My life is pointless." I don't remember how I responded, but of course there's a point to every life. We may not always see it clearly if we're asking, "Is my life successful?" - and thinking of the way success is usually measured - good job, nice home, happy marriage, great kids, lots of friends.

Better questions to ask might be the bigger questions: What am I *for*? Where am I heading? Who am I *about* - myself, or the One who's *really* at the centre of the universe? And whatever's happening in my life, whatever the consequences of the choices I've made, am I allowing those things to draw me closer to God, or to take me away from him?

I

We all know how different people can react to the same thing in different ways. One person sees a glass as half-full, to another person the same glass is half-empty. Two soldiers experience the same horrors of war. One refuses to believe in a God who allows such things to happen. The other sees God as the only comfort and light in all the darkness. Different reactions to the same thing. Different attitudes to the same God.

I heard recently of two women who both lost their husbands to cancer while they were still in their forties. One says her husband's death was what brought her back to God. For the other, her husband's death was evidence God didn't care about her. Similar circumstances - very different reactions.

We read in the Bible about two men who reacted differently to meeting Jesus. Both of them were wealthy. One was respectable and respected, and confident enough to seek out Jesus out with a question he had. What did he have to do to be sure of gaining eternal life?

"You know the commandments," said Jesus. "Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't lie, don't steal, honour your father and mother." Confident he'd always done the right thing, he replied, perhaps with some pride, "I've kept all those since I was a boy." But since the commandments are all about loving God and loving your neighbour, it seems Jesus wanted to test what this man's life was really about. What *did* he love most - his money, or God and his neighbour?

So Jesus said, "There's still one thing missing. Sell your possessions and give your money to the poor. That way you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." At this the man's face fell, and he turned away sadly. For him life was nothing without his possessions.

Zacchaeus was the other wealthy man who met Jesus - so keen to see him he climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of him passing by. It's doubtful he wanted Jesus to see him. In his better moments he must have been ashamed of the way he'd got his money - he was a chief tax-collector, so a collaborator with the hated Romans, *and* a cheat through what he added on as his commission. Jesus was en route to Jerusalem, but stopped under the tree where he knew Zacchaeus was. He called up to him, "Come on down. I'm coming to your place today." Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

In the company of Jesus he saw his life for what it was, and he saw what he had to do. So he rose to his feet, and said, "Lord, here and now I give half of all I have to the poor. And whatever I've cheated out of anyone I'll repay four times." Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house. That's what I came for - to seek and to save what was lost."

II

Two wealthy men, both face to face with Jesus. One was sad to turn away from Jesus, but still he made that choice, because for him his wealth was everything. The other was glad to welcome Jesus into his home and life, which was turned upside down by the truth and mercy Jesus offered him.

What distinguishes us from one another are the choices we make, big and small. We think we're making them, but they end up making us. We become what we commit to.

In his teaching Jesus described two different ways of living. He talked about doing things, not to impress others, but for God; about the impossibility of serving both God and money - two very different masters. He talked about putting aside anxious care over what we need, to seek after what matters to God; about being merciful to others rather than standing in judgment on them. And then he set before his listeners a choice between the two different ways - which he described as narrow and hard and *unpopular* versus comfortably broad and popular. He called for a commitment to the harder way that leads to the life we're meant for. He said:

Come in through the narrow gate, because the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and many go in through it. But the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and only a few find it.

That choice faces us all - to turn *towards* the Source of all life and love, or to turn *away* from him; to continue on with our natural, self-serving way of life or to pursue the higher and harder way of living under God's rule to love him and others. The daily choices we make, how we react to events and to our changing circumstances, all play a part in an emerging pattern - of moving towards God or away from him.

In the words of the old poem:

*To every man there openeth a high way and a low,
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go.*

The paradox is that in going against our instinct to put ourselves first we find our real selves and our reason for living. If, on the other hand, we're into self-preservation, into self-consciously defending ourselves, we end up losing everything. To quote Jesus again:

Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. And what profit is there in gaining the whole world and losing your own soul?

The choice to live under God's rule is a choice to swim against the tide - to be different, to be considered strange - something all of us hate. But we don't choose that road for the sake of its popularity and comfort.

We choose it for its destination, because Jesus said it's the road that leads to life. But if our lives are centred on ourselves, that road, however well-peopled, leads away from God to our final destruction.

III

The road to God which Jesus calls us to enter is only narrow in the sense that all truth, by definition, is narrow. In mathematics two plus two equal four, and can't be broadened to equal three and a half or five. Likewise there's a measure for what constitutes goodness and love and justice, which thankfully can't be altered by human whim or ever-changing social opinion. We have a remnant of that measure in our consciences, and we see it in all its beauty in Jesus, the Christ.

But if God's standards for us are in one sense narrow, they are also liberating. Most people I know who are on the less popular road of following Christ are far from what we might think of as narrow-minded. That stereotype - humourless people whose one aim is to stop others enjoying themselves, tightly-shut minds and judgementalism without mercy - is itself way too narrow, and far less common than it's portrayed to be. You could also describe as narrow people whose world has shrunk to believing only what they can see, or those whose own concerns absorb all their time.

On the whole people who live for Christ are anything *but* narrow. Broad in their sympathies, they take the initiative in reaching out to others; they give generously, and are kindly, even to those who hurt them. Because they're involved in things outside themselves, they don't find life pointless. Seeing beyond this world to the next seems to motivate them to use their time here to do more and be more than they ever thought possible.

Like a ninety-eight-year-old friend of ours, house-bound now, and profoundly deaf for many years. Restricted as she certainly is, she never ceases to amaze me with her knowledge of what's going on in the world. Her interest in others is boundless, her concern for their welfare utterly genuine and her generosity unstinting. Her prayers range the world. She made a choice long ago to follow Jesus on the road that leads to God, and however rough that road's been for her, she keeps on toward the goal of being in the new heaven and earth Jesus promised, when her journey in this world is over.

It's the *goal* that draws us through the narrow gate and makes the hard road endurable.

B.J. Hunnicutt, a character on the television series **Mash**, didn't give in to the temptation to be unfaithful to his wife while he was in Korea. It was a very narrow road to travel. It was sometimes very difficult to stay on it. Amongst those around him, he seems to have been the only one on that road. But he gave this reason for sticking to it: "I live in an insane world where nothing makes sense. Everyone around me lives for the now, because there may not be a tomorrow. But I have to live for tomorrow, because for me there is no now." For B.J., what kept him going was his hope for a future reunited with his family - a long life with the woman he'd chosen to be with, siblings for his little daughter, and all the blessings of a happy home.

And it's *our* hope of what lies ahead that keeps us on the path of following Christ, however rough and narrow it might be.

Conclusion

Still today Jesus calls us to choose between two roads - the narrow road that leads to life, and the broad road that leads to destruction. And even if the pattern of our lives has been made up of choices that have drawn us *away* from God, to the very end he holds out to us the chance to change direction.

Remember the two criminals crucified with Jesus? One chose the easy path: he joined the crowd in hurling abuse at Jesus. But the other criminal saw the same Jesus quite differently. Through the fog of his pain and

in spite of Jesus' un-king-like appearance, he saw who Jesus is, and called out, "Lord, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Jesus said, "Today you'll be with me in Paradise."

That's still his response to whoever turns to him, however much their past choices have moved them away from God.

Our Father God, help us to enter and stick to the road that leads to life with you, through the great mercy you've poured out on us in Christ. Amen.