

Reflection for Sunday 18th October 2020
Exodus 33:12-23 and Matthew 22:15-22

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

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You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir

Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread
You may be sleeping on the floor, or sleeping in a king-sized bed

Still, you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Those are just some of the lyrics from the song “*You're gonna have to serve somebody*” by the Nobel Laureate and hugely talented, Bob Dylan.

As with so many of his songs, Dylan cuts through layers of human self-delusion, in this case that mistaken idea which affects anyone who thinks it possible to live without faith and to live totally free from any kind of control. And, working on the fundamental premise that ultimately the choice is between darkness or light, Dylan concludes each chorus thus:

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

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The idea that it is possible to live without faith and to live totally free from any kind of external control is, of course, one that is particularly manifest in modern and post-modern societies of the so-called developed world. Religious faith remains centrally important for the majority of the global population, even today, as has been the case across the span of human history, though you might not know it living in western Europe. And even when you leave traditional religion aside, faith remains fundamental to secure living. At its most basic, none of us would get out of bed if we didn't have faith that certain things can be taken as given – guaranteed – even if we cannot prove them in any particular moment. There is no such thing as life without faith and where we put our faith will have a major influence upon the kind of people we become. Bob Dylan takes that one stage further when he declares that in the final analysis some of the claimants for our faith are good and some bad --- so we need always to be careful in deciding deliberately or by accidental default --- where we allow our faith to rest.

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For Moses the idea of living by faith --- and by religious faith --- was as natural as eating or drinking -- - but that which he took for granted was put to the ultimate test when God called him to go down into Egypt to confront Pharaoh demanding the release of the Children of Israel. Having taken the plunge, Moses has discovered that God has been true to his word --- yet burdened by the responsibilities of leadership, Moses faith has wavered --- his strength of conviction has weakened. Apparently lost in an endless wilderness, spiritual as well as literal, the Children of Israel have begun to question the wisdom of following Moses and his God – and they are drawn to place their faith elsewhere. Moses isn't sure that he has the stomach for the fight – and as much in frustration as despair he cries out to God – saying effectively --- ***“Look God if you would just explain the reasoning and the logic of your plan --- and if you would just let me see you face to face --- then I'd be much better placed to convince the Children of Israel that they should continue to follow you through me!”***

How many of us have had similar thoughts. Surely all of us!

Gently but firmly God rejects Moses' idea. He agrees to let Moses catch a glimpse of his glory – but never to see him face to face. Secondly, he by-passes the request for full understanding of the plan – saying simply but frustratingly ***“I will go with you”***. This latter, elicits an even more exasperated response from Moses ***“Well if you don't go with us what hope is there? How will anyone ever believe that we are your people if you don't accompany us?”***

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This is such a crucially important conversation between humankind, in the shape of Moses and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In saying to Moses ***“You cannot see me face to face and live!”*** God is saying ***“You are a creature, and I am the creator! I am God and you are not!”*** In bypassing the request for full disclosure and understanding of God’s plan, God is effectively saying the same thing. ***“You cannot possibly grasp my plans and purposes. I am God and you are not!”***

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And critically – essentially – fundamentally --- that all boils down to this. There is no such thing as life without faith and you have to choose where to place your faith. ***You're gonna have to serve somebody --- it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord ----But you're gonna have to serve somebody.***

When, many centuries later, the Pharisees try to trap Jesus, with their question as to whether or not a devout Jew should pay Roman taxes, the issue of faith is still to the fore. Caesar demands obedience and faith through brute and violent strength. The religious authorities of Judaism demand the faith of the people and claim authority over them, based upon their superior understanding of and closer relationship with God. So long as they can convince the people that they are on intimate ***“face to face”*** terms with God and are ***“in the know”*** so far as God’s plans and purposes are concerned, then they can expect to be respected and obeyed. But Jesus threatens this cosy situation. Jesus claims that they are not as ***“in the know”*** as they pretend to be – indeed that they are quite mistaken in many respects. And Jesus claims that he is on far more intimate terms with God than are they. To make matters worse – the people believe him – they see in Jesus an authority which is totally absent from the Pharisees. Such a threat cannot be tolerated – must be eliminated – hence the trap – a trap which also calls upon the threats of Caesar.

But Jesus is way ahead of them. Pointing to the image of Caesar on the coin he declares – ***“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s!”***

And what is God’s?

Well, as God made clear to Moses so many years previously – that which is God’s is faith --- the demand to follow in obedient faith. At the time of Moses that was a big enough demand --- for God was not visible – had no idols before whom to bow down. Today --- especially in our society --- the demand is even greater so long as we cling to the delusion that to live by faith is irrational, illogical and unnecessary. Bob Dylan railed against that idea in his song --- and it is good that he did so. But the song still relies upon logic and reason to persuade – which can never wholly or effectively prevail.

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What is required is the voice of authority. That authority which is not claimed in words – but simply demonstrated in actions. It was in his actions ---- prayerfully and with a deep spiritual gentleness bringing healing and inclusion and compassion --- that Jesus' authority rested. It will not and cannot ever be different for his Church.

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As I move on from here in two weeks' time the situation of the congregations may seem more perilous than when I came. The whole Kirk faces a situation of numerical and financial decline which is hard for any of us to contemplate. My presence here has not been lastingly effective in arresting that decline and so it might justifiably be said that my time here has not been a success. That is not for me to say.

But what I do say, is this, that the ultimate success of the Church will never be measured in numbers – either of people or pounds. The success of the Church can only be measured in its faith --- faith in action – through worship and the work of loving our neighbour with the love of God. Whatever true authority the Church has ever had --- rests solely upon her faith.

You're gonna have to serve somebody!

Well it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord.

Every day I must choose and so must you.

In my study I have a wooden plaque which was given to me over thirty years ago as I began my journey in Ministry of Word and Sacrament. It has a short verse from Deuteronomy – a quotation from Moses' successor, Joshua, as he and the Children of Israel stood on the threshold of the Promised Land.

It says, "***As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.***"

I have tried to live by that, and I have known many trials and many blessings as a result. I would not have had it any other way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen