

Whose side are you on? by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 16th March 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

Introduction: Facing conflict

Conflict – something most of us prefer to avoid most of the time, but ignoring it isn't always the best response. We're aware of conflict on the international scene, in politics, and, closer to home, in workplaces and families. It also takes place within us, as we try to juggle different priorities and relationships. And as Emma reminded us last week, we are also in a struggle against temptation, against things which distract us and take us away from God. It's so easy to just listen to our own desires and feelings, or to follow the crowd, to take the easy option, instead of considering what God might want from us. In other words, we avoid the conflict by turning a deaf ear to God and doing what we want, or what others expect us to do.

Which way to go?

Jesus warned that we have a choice to make: whether to follow the broad, easy road that most people seem to be on, or the narrow path that leads to life:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”¹

¹ Matthew 7:13-24 NIV

Paul gives a similar warning in our reading from his letter to the church in Philippi:

For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

Those last three phrases seem to sum up all that is bad and harmful about the world we live in now. “Their god is their stomach” reflects the blatant consumerism which keeps telling us to pander to our greed, not only for food, but for other pleasures. “Go on, you deserve it”, say the ads.

What does Paul mean by “their glory is in their shame”? J.B. Phillips translates it like this: “their pride is in what they should be ashamed of”. To illustrate this point, I’m going to give an example that you may find uncomfortable listening. That’s how people experienced some of Jesus’ teaching. I don’t think we should avoid difficult issues just because they make us feel uncomfortable.

A current example

At the recent Oscars ceremony, Best Picture went to *Anora*, a film about a prostitute who marries the son of a Russian oligarch. Best Actress went to Mikey Madison who played the lead character in that film. My comment is not about the film, which I have not seen – and from what I’ve read it contains far more sex than I’d be comfortable watching – but about a comment made by Mikey Madison in her acceptance speech and the roar of approval from the audience when she said “I also just want to, again, recognize

and honour the sex worker community” which she promised to “continue to support and be an ally”².

Around the world there are influential voices arguing that prostitution should be treated as an honourable profession, which women choose to follow and find to be “empowering”, and that it should be decriminalised. It’s a sign of the increasingly permissive attitude to sex, in which the key moral imperative is simply “do what’s right for you”. If men want to pay for casual sex, and if there are women who are happy to provide the service, then what’s the problem? Why impose outdated repressive values on people who just want to exercise their free choice?

The reality, however, according to a 2024 report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, is that “the vast majority of victims [i.e. prostitutes], 80-90%, want to escape prostitution but lack alternatives for sustainable survival”.³

Prostitution is a major motivation for human trafficking and the exploitation of vulnerable people. Traffickers and pimps make money out of exploiting desperate individuals. The nature of the transaction, where the man is the customer, produces an inherently unequal relationship between the

² Acceptance speech by Mikey Maddison, 3rd March 2025 Youtube [Oscars 2025: Mikey Madison accepts the award for best actress for her role in 'Anora'](#)

³ Reem Alsalaem [Response to a Political Critique and Personal Attack Against a United Nations Report that Presented New Evidence About Prostitution as a Cause and Consequence of Violence Against Women and Girls](#), page 7

two people engaging in sex. One Canadian ex-prostitute wrote:

“More than 4,300 men used my body for their one-sided sexual gratification, many of them slapping me, biting me, spitting on me, verbally abusing me, secretly filming me, choking me, removing condoms, stalking me, and demanding every disgusting act of sexual perversion one can imagine – acts of non-state torture. I became an empty shell of a human, operating in a constant state of hypervigilance, dissociation, and numbness.”⁴

Prostitution, whether or not it is entered into freely, is immoral. It should be no surprise to Christians that behaviour which the Bible condemns results in the exploitation and degradation of people who are made in God’s image. I use this example to illustrate the principle that God has given us moral rules for a reason, and when we chose to go our own way, justifying immoral behaviour with rational arguments that merely glorify human autonomy and rebellion against God, people get hurt. People like Mikey Madison are promoting an attitude in which, as the apostle Paul puts it “their pride is in what they should be ashamed of”.

The root of the problem

I use this example to illustrate a point about the conflict between worldly values and those of God’s kingdom. Attitudes to prostitution are only one example of a mindset which, as Paul puts it, is about having your mind “set on

⁴ Op cit, page 4

earthly things”.⁵ The fundamental issue is not the rights and wrongs of prostitution *per se*. It’s whether we choose to align our way of thinking about everything in life according to the philosophy and values of the world around us or according to the will of God. We need to decide which side we are on.

Of course, many of the moral issues in society and the moral choices we make are complex. That is not a reason to avoid thinking about the rights and wrongs of the issue. What God is looking for in us is a desire to do his will and the courage to make our choices accordingly. This involves taking the trouble to find out how God wants us to live, and being willing to critique the values and beliefs of society in the light of God’s truth.

Two kingdoms

Last week George and I were in South Africa, visiting our son and daughter-in-law and our new grandson Joshua. Joshua’s mother is a South African citizen, and her first language is Afrikaans. His father, our son Adam, is a British citizen. Joshua has the right to be a citizen of both countries. He will no doubt grow up speaking both Afrikaans and English. At times he may find himself in a conflict between the two cultures, and he will have to negotiate his two identities.

We, as Christians, also have dual citizenship. Obviously, we belong to this world, and share the culture and customs of the country of which we are nationals. But, as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians,

⁵ Philippians 3:19 NIV

our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...⁶

I hope our grandson Joshua as he grows up will learn about both of the two cultures he has been born into. Living in South Africa, he is likely to be influenced to a greater extent by the culture and customs around him. But Adam, George and I will want to make sure he also learns about his British heritage. As Christians living in a secular world, we too are very likely to go with the culture and values of the media, current political correctness or what our friends think. It takes commitment and effort to find the narrow gate and walk the narrow road that leads to life. But if we decide that we're on God's side, and that our citizenship in heaven is more important than fitting in with society, we will make an effort to align our thinking and order our behaviour according to the rules of God's kingdom.

The rejection of Jesus

In today's gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is warned that his life is in danger. Over the previous chapters, the religious establishment have taken a dislike to Jesus, because he has not been afraid to speak out against hypocrisy and corruption. The religious leaders of Jesus' day and Jesus were supposed to be on the same side – God's side, that is. But Jesus identified that many of them were more concerned about their own wealth, status and reputation than about the values of God's kingdom. Their idea of what constituted righteous living was about rituals and ceremonies, which were a barrier to the poor. They seemed

⁶ Philippians 3:20 NIV

to lack compassion for people with messed up lives, whereas Jesus reached out to people on the margins – prostitutes and tax collectors, for example. For Jesus, being on God’s side meant being on the side of the poor, the disadvantaged and the lost sheep. In his famous lament over Jerusalem, he expresses God’s desire to gather his people like a hen gathering her chicks together, and God’s sadness at their unwillingness to respond. The warning he gives is that as a consequence, their “house”, that is to say the Temple, would be abandoned by God.

We too should heed the warning. We need to show whose side we are on by listening to God, aligning our thinking with the values of his Kingdom, and then living them out in all we say and do, not being afraid to be different.

An example to follow

Our model is Jesus. But we can also gain encouragement and guidance from the example of Christians we know who model Kingdom values – compassion, generosity, integrity and courage, to name a few. This is the advice Paul gives the church in Philippi:

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.⁷

And maybe then our lives will also serve as an example for others to follow.

Paul finishes this exhortation with an expression of confidence in his readers:

⁷ Philippians 3:17 NIV

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!⁸

We have chosen to be on the Lord's side. We have acknowledged Jesus as our King. Now let's live out our faith in such a way that he will be proud of us, and that one day we may hear his voice saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant"⁹.

Question for personal reflection:

Are there any ways in which my values, attitudes and behaviour look more like those of the world than those of God's Kingdom? If so, what am I going to do about it?

For further reading (if you can't access this online, please ask and I will give you a paper copy):

Christianity is being attacked in the West. Why won't our church leaders admit it? | Opinion | Premier Christianity

Article in Premier Christianity, 12th March 2025

(I read this after I'd written this sermon – it's definitely worth a read, and please also follow the links to stories about Christians who have been punished for expressing biblical views, such as Kristie Higgs and Rev Bernard Randall, if you are not already familiar with them.)

⁸ Philippians 4:1 NIV

⁹ Matthew 25:21 NIV