



Choosing sides

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Joshua 24:1-2a. 14-18

It may seem obvious whose side the people of Israel *ought* to be on, but it is more complicated than we may think. The Old Testament tells a story of a bunch of slaves, rescued from Egypt, formed into a cohesive whole by many years of wilderness travel and by a meeting with God at a desert volcano, settling in a land occupied by others among whom they have to live. They have plenty of gods to choose from; gods of Egypt and of the Canaanite people of the land of Israel. The Canaanite gods in particular have their attractions; they are gods of fertility and harvest, gods for an agricultural community. What can Yahweh the God of the desert mountain know about making the crops grow?

So Joshua makes them choose, once and for all. And they give the right answer. There is only one God who is their God, the one who has watched over them for generations and brought them to where they are now. They swear allegiance. They make a covenant. They will, of course, break it many times, but for now they know whose side they are on, and who is on their side.

Our world presents many claims on our attention and our allegiance, many of which matter greatly. But above all, like the Israelites, we have to choose to be on the side of the God who saves and guides us through all eternity. ☺

Help us, Lord, to stay true to you amid all the complexity of our lives. Keep us mindful of the immensity of your love for us, that we may know where our true allegiance lies and worship only you, our one true God. Amen.

St Paul

Part I

by Becky Mynett

For the next four weeks Becky will be looking at St Paul, his life and theology.

Paul was born in Tarsus, in modern-day Turkey, at around the same time Jesus was born. He was Jewish and (like many Greek-speaking Jews) he also used a Jewish name, Saul. According to Acts, he was a Roman citizen, but he was also a Pharisee, which means he followed the Jewish Law in the strictest possible way. Acts says Paul was

brought up in Jerusalem and studied under Gamaliel, the leader of the Pharisees, but most scholars now think he was brought up in Tarsus (although he may have studied in Jerusalem later). In any case, he did not follow Gamaliel's advice to leave Jesus' followers alone; in his letter to the Galatians he admits that he was initially a violent persecutor of the Church.

Without Paul, we may never have heard of Jesus, far less consider him to be the son of God. His influence on Christianity was crucial to its development from a minor Jewish sect to the world religion it is today.

Becky is a translator, editor and writer, and Reader in the Diocese of St Albans. ☺

“Faith, as Paul saw it, was a living, flaming thing leading to surrender and obedience to the commandments of Christ.”

A. W. Tozer (1897-1963), pastor, author and spiritual mentor

Food in the Bible

Locusts

by Caroline Fletcher

John the Baptist is well known for eating locusts. Some argue that the word translated as “locusts” in our Bibles refers to carob beans, but most disagree. After all, consuming locusts was not unusual. Jewish dietary laws allowed them to be eaten and even today they are part of some people's diets across the world.

Indeed, in 2013 the BBC reported Israelis dealing with an influx of locusts by enjoying them coated in chocolate and breadcrumbs. In biblical times they were often ground up and added to flour, providing an invaluable source of protein.

John's diet was compatible with the simple lifestyle of a prophet living in the wilderness. This is probably why the Gospel writers tell us he ate locusts: they wanted to emphasise his link to the wilderness to show John as the new Elijah, recalling the Old Testament prophet Elijah who spent time in the wilderness hiding from queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19). ☺