

## Family Service, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023

### 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

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#### Sermon by Peter Evans

#### John 12: 20 – 33, Jesus predicts his death

*Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. 'Sir,' they said, 'we would like to see Jesus.' Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.*

*Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.*

*'Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!'*

*Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.*

*Jesus said, 'This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.*

#### The Talk

How good are you at looking into the future. Most people say they cannot predict it at all, but, within a limited context, we are actually quite good at it. It's part of how we navigate our way through life.

For example, if we are driving along and the car in front of us brakes and stops, we know (almost certainly), that if we do not brake, then there will be an accident. Or, if we have planned to have baked beans on toast for tea, then (almost certainly) we will have baked beans on toast for tea. There are many such examples. This is reading the runes, and it is very useful in very many situations.

But as the complexity increases, then our ability to predict the future reduces. At the time of writing, there are four teams left in the 2024 FA cup. Picking at random would give a 1 in 4 chance of getting it right. A bit of skill and judgement might increase the odds.

But from here, March 2024, picking a winner for the 2025 competition would be nigh on impossible. If you got it right, it would be pure luck.

However, some people are quite good at it. Gerry & Sylvia Anderson, the creators of Thunderbirds, (is Thunderbirds still a thing?) predicted videophone watches, rockets that could land themselves instead of falling into the sea and heavy air lifters shaped like blimps. And that was back in 1965, when electricity had only just been invented.

And some are not good at it all. Robert Peston, the ITV political commentator, is always making predictions. Just three weeks ago he said that Lyndsay Hoyle, the speaker of the house of commons, wouldn't last the weekend in post. Completely wrong. It's a tough job, trying to predict the future in politics.

In our services this morning. I gave everyone a playing card, face down, and asked them to imagine turning the card over a minute or so into the future and imagining what they saw. Out of a total congregation of 50 or so, two people got it right, which is better than the odds suggest. So maybe somebody could see the future, who knows?

But occasionally, we'll sometimes step outside of reading the runes and turn to other stuff, such as reading horoscopes. If we do this for a bit of light amusement, then that's one thing, but if we are doing it to seek guidance for our future, then that's a different ballgame.

We do this sort of thing because we are seeking some certainty in an area where we can sometimes feel insecure – what does the future hold for us.

In the services, I read out a couple of sample horoscopes. They were completely rubbish of course, but when we listen to "our" horoscope, we try and make them fit in some way. We are looking to add some certainty into an unknown area.

Now, of course, I'm sure that most of us haven't read a horoscope in years, having long since learnt that they are of no value. But it's one that most of us can identify with, and it illustrates a point.

In the bible, there is a story about Saul and the necromancer of Endor, which could also be the title of the next Star Wars film. It's near the beginning of the bible, in 1 Samuel, chapter 28. Saul has had a turbulent reign as king. He had tried to do some things that were right, but was basically a mixed bag. And at the end of 1 Samuel, there is a war looming with the Philistines. Saul is somewhat scared, has previously had a big bust up with God, and feels very much alone. Instead of returning to God, Saul goes to seek the services of a necromancer or a medium, in Endor, to try and find out his future and to work out how to beat the Philistines.

Without going into the details, let's just say that it doesn't go well, and by the next day, (spoiler alert) Saul is dead. If you'd like to know more details, then 1 Samuel 28 is the place to look.

So where had Saul gone wrong? He is trying to discern the future, his future, without relying on God. The very act of going to the necromancer is stepping away from God. He was putting his trust in something other than God. In going to the necromancer, Saul was turning his back on God and placing his trust in other things.

And it's the same with us and things like horoscopes. If we start to take them seriously, then we too are turning our backs on God by placing our trust in other things.

Which brings us to the passage. This passage is all about trust – Jesus' trust in his heavenly Father.

It's worth giving the passage some context. This passage is all part of John's narrative about the end days of Jesus. We'd normally approach it as a group of separate stories. The raising of Lazarus from the dead. Mary's (as in the sister of Martha) anointing of Jesus with ointment. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Palm Sunday). And then this passage where Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. And as a footnote - even though Palm Sunday is next week in our calendar, in the gospel narrative, it has already happened by the time we get to this passage. Jesus rode into Jerusalem towards the beginning of chapter 12.

But read them through all together, and a broader context emerges. Lazarus runs through it as a subtext, having been raised to life in the previous chapter, Lazarus has been at dinner with Jesus and has become famous to the point where the chief priests want to kill him.

Jesus' fame continues to grow. The crowds are becoming more of an issue. The Pharisees are getting genuinely worried and ask themselves "What do we do about

Jesus of Nazareth". And even the start of this passage is specifically about people seeking out Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus can see his future. Probably not in the way that can predict the 2025 FA cup, but more in the way of reading the runes, being aware of what's coming. He knows the Pharisees want to arrest him and execute him. He knows that he is "God become human" to die for us, to allow forgiveness and restore our relationship with God.

And Jesus has a decision to make. Does he let the future come to him as he sees it will happen. Or does he run away. Disappear to a cave in the countryside. And this decision revisits Jesus again in a couple of days' time, in the garden of Gethsemane – take this cup away from me he prays.

And on both occasions, his decision is to trust the will of his heavenly Father. To trust that he is doing the right thing. To trust that God's will, God's plan, is driven by love and is the best it can possibly be.

Jesus trusts his Father.

So the question for us is this. As we look to the future, whatever our age, and whatever our circumstances, where are we going to place our trust? The answer is, obviously, that we should place our trust in God. But in practice, it can be a lot easier to say and a lot harder to do.

So, for example, are we distracted by things like horoscopes, literally or figuratively? Do we place our trust in bank balances, or political parties, or in social status. Or in keeping fit. Or some of the more contemporary tropes such as being true to yourself. There's a whole long list of things that we can try and trust in - to take care of our uncertain futures. Some of these things can be fine in their own way, but if we let them take the place of God, then our trust in them is misplaced and we are no better than Saul.

I know that trusting in God can also be hard. But here's the thing. The closer we are to God, the easier it is to trust. The more we draw close to him, the stronger that relationship becomes. This is where our priority needs to be.

And the flip side to building this relationship with God is that life becomes better for us. It's one of those amazing paradoxes – the more we commit and submit our lives to God, the better they become. Life with God is always better.

No matter our circumstances. No matter how well we can see what's coming around the corner, whether that's a lottery win or the proverbial encounter with a bus, life with God is always better.

To be clear, life with God does not mean it will only be lottery wins. Life with God will be the usual mix of highs and lows, good things and challenges. That is the human condition. But in all these things, good and otherwise, God being there with us adds a joy to the good things and comfort and support to the challenges.

Life with God is always better. It brings that closeness of relationship with our creator God, made right with him through Jesus. It builds us into the people God intended us to be.

God yearns for us to draw close to him, to open our hearts to him and follow the life he has laid out for us. To trust in him.

Life with God is always better. No matter what the future holds. Amen