

Sermon at Gypsy Smith Stone - 25th April 2004

It is a great privilege to add my welcome to you to this wonderful part of St Peter's-in-the-Forest parish and to preach a sermon at the stone which commemorates the birth-place of one of the most famous and most loved evangelists of all time. Rodney Smith – born here in a Gypsy tent – who never had a days formal education, who converted to Christianity at the age of 16, who was to travel 5 continents, preach around the world twice, who was to cross the Atlantic some 45 times, who was to bring tens of thousands of people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ; Rodney Smith, who was awarded an MBE for his services preaching to servicemen in the First World War, who died in 1947 on the Atlantic while bound for America, who himself returned here and preached near this spot at an evangelistic rally in 1935 which saw 10,000 people turn up to him talk about his life – Rodney Smith, born here on Mill Plain in Epping Forest in 1860.

Rodney loved music – His Dad Cornelius played the violin in pubs and as a child Rodney would accompany his Dad singing, dancing and taking the collection; it was a child's song about Jesus that comforted his mother Polly as she was dying when Rodney was still a small child. Later he heard the great Ira Sankey sing, one of the events leading to his conversion, and he began his life as a preacher by singing hymns to people, earning the accolade “the singing gypsy boy”. His biographer David Lazell explains that Gypsy Smith ‘believed in the power of song to touch hearts which might otherwise have

stayed closed to his preaching. And he saw a connection between singing and joy. 'Singing is the sign of joy. The people who can sing and do are the happy and triumphant. The early Christians sang their way to victory. When the church has a song in her heart, she will sing with grace to the Lord. The Word will follow.' Indeed it was a feature of his sermons that he would break into song and to honour that tradition I'll invite you to join me in a verse or two of some songs as I proceed throughout this sermon: **O Lord my God....**

My text for this spring sermon in honour of Gypsy Smith comes from Deuteronomy chapter 30, verse 19: "I am now giving you a choice between life and death, between God's blessing and curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make: Choose life."

What an astonishingly simple and yet profound message that is - "choose life". Rodney Smith had an extraordinary gift for preaching, it is said he never held a meeting without a conversion and at some meetings 1000s gave their lives to the Lord. But for many of us when we seek to make Christ known to those around us, its often so hard to find the right words - and yet what an encouragement those words are, what a message for us to take to the people of Waltham Forest: Choose life. I think that's a message every Christian here can share with those we meet, with those who don't know the Lord, many of whom are indeed as good as dead: Choose life. There's a lovely story of Rodney Smith preaching to a group of aristocratic ladies in New York. Unfazed

by the presence of Mrs John D Rockefeller he simply preached on forgiveness and commented afterwards “I only remembered they were sinners needing a Saviour”. We can echo that sentiment, taking that simple message away with us today: Choose Life.

Consider the original context of that message to the people of Israel. Moses has led them out of slavery in Egypt, they’ve passed through the Red Sea, and now they’ve made a covenant with God, an agreement to keep his commands before they enter the promised land. And yet God warns them that if they disobey him in the future they will be scattered among the nations - they will lose everything that God has blessed them with. So they have a straight choice, will they obey God’s commandments and retain his blessing or will they reject them and receive his curse - will they choose life or death?

Isn’t this the same choice we are faced with today? Isn’t this the choice we have to put before the people of Waltham Forest? Will you obey God and receive his blessing or will you reject him? Will you choose life or death? And within the whole of that chapter of scripture, Deuteronomy 30, I believe we can find some clues as to how to break that message down into three further choices that we can put before the people of Waltham Forest, namely choose prosperity, choose purpose and choose peace.

Choose life, choose prosperity. In Deuteronomy prosperity is one of God’s key

promises to the Israelites. And they are instructed in verse 2 “If you and your descendants will turn back to the Lord with all your heart and obey his commands that I am giving you today, then the Lord your God will have mercy on you. He will bring you back from the nations where he has scattered you and will make you prosperous again.” I don’t suppose the human desire to be prosperous is any weaker today than it was way back then. And yet what does it mean to be prosperous?

Some of you may have seen the film *Trainspotting*. It’s not an easy film to watch, it depicts a group of people, typical of many young people in our country who share a lifestyle of self-abuse, dishonesty, greed and violence. And yet that film was extraordinarily popular and is now a cult movie. It begins with the words “Choose Life” spoken by a character who swiftly rejects that choice. At the end of the film the character breaks away from his so called friends, in fact stealing a huge sum of money he should have shared with them following the sale of a case of heroine. But almost as disturbing as the lifestyle he eventually rejects is the lifestyle he then chooses to adopt, he believes, in his own words, that he is “choosing life”. This is what he says (albeit with one word beginning with F left out): So why did I do it? I could offer a million answers, all false. The truth is that I'm a bad person, but that's going to change, I'm going to change. This is the last of this sort of thing. I'm cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm going to be just like you: the job, the family, the big television, the washing machine, the car, the

compact disc and electrical tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisurewear, luggage, three-piece suite, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine to five, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing the gutters, getting by, looking ahead, to the day you die.

The sad thing is that many people think that the lifestyle outlined in the closing words of that film is the best that life has to offer. Not that there's anything wrong with having a children, walking in the park or clearing the gutters - but there is in that quote from the film a vision of life as almost nothing other than the accumulation "to the day you die" of material goods.

The problem today is not that people don't wish to prosper but that they desire the wrong kind of prosperity. They desire material prosperity, the accumulation of things they think will make them happy, people live to shop, and yet they don't realise how shallow that kind of prosperity is, how little satisfaction it gives, compared to the prosperity we enjoy secure in the knowledge that we belong to the Lord. When Rodney Smith was converted at a church service in Cambridge someone was heard to say "It's only a gypsy boy". Rodney was poor, he was not educated, but in God's sight he was a rich little gypsy boy. I don't need to spell out to Christians present what it means to feel prosperous in the company of the Lord, you know already, but I do want to encourage all of us to go out and share that with others, to encourage others to choose

prosperity - not the shallow kind that comes from depending on material goods, but the deeply assuring, life-sustaining kind that comes from living our lives depending on God. The latest Gypsies for Christ newsletter puts it wonderfully "we thank God for His economy of grace lavished upon us in Christ without stint or reluctance which makes us immeasurably wealthy in our wonderful Saviour." And I say to you today Choose prosperity. Choose life: **Give thanks with a grateful heart ...**

Choose life. Choose purpose. In Deuteronomy 30, the second promise in store for the restored Israel is purpose. Once again they will have, as it says in verse 10, to obey him and keep all his laws" - including, for sure, the weightier matters of the law about which Jesus needed to remind his fellow Jews, namely justice, mercy and truth. Once again, you know, I don't need to tell you that living according to the Lord's commandments gives purpose to our lives. And yet so many people live without purpose. There's a story going around, forgive me if you've heard it, but it does provide a good illustration of how easy it is, even for Christians, to be distracted from following in the Lord's ways.

Satan called a worldwide convention. In his opening address to his evil angels, he said, "We can't keep the Christians from going to church. We can't keep them from reading their Bibles & knowing the truth. But we can do something else. We can keep them from forming an intimate, abiding experience in Christ. If they gain that connection with Jesus, our power over them is broken. So let them go to church, but steal their time, so they can't gain that experience in Jesus Christ. This is what I want you to do, angels. Distract them from gaining hold of their Saviour and maintaining that vital connection throughout their day!" "How shall we do this?" shouted his angels.

"Keep them busy in the nonessentials of life and invent unnumbered schemes to occupy their minds," he answered. "Tempt them to spend, spend, spend, then, borrow, borrow, borrow. Convince the wives to go to work and the husbands to work 6 or 7 days a week, 10-12 hrs a day, so they can afford their lifestyles. Keep them from spending time with their children. As their family fragments, soon, their homes will offer no escape from the pressures of work. Overstimulate their minds so that they cannot hear that still small voice. Entice them to play the radio or cassette player whenever they drive, to keep the TV, the VCR, & their CDs going constantly in their homes. And see to it that every store and restaurant in the world plays music constantly. This will jam their minds and break that union with Christ. "Fill their coffee tables with magazines & newspapers. Pound their minds with the news 24 hrs. a day. Invade their driving moments with order catalogues, and every kind of newsletter and promotional offering, free products, services, and false hopes." "Even in their recreation, let them be excessive. Have them return from their recreation exhausted, disquieted and unprepared for the coming week. Don't let them go out in nature. Send them to amusement parks, sporting events, and concerts instead. "And when they meet for spiritual fellowship, involve them in gossip and small talk so that they leave with troubled consciences and unsettled emotion." "Let them be involved in soul-winning. But crowd their lives with so many good causes they have no time to seek power from Christ. Soon they will be working in their own strength, sacrificing their health and family unity for the good of the cause."

It was quite a convention in the end. And the evil angels went eagerly to their assignments causing Christians everywhere to get busy, busy, busy and rush here and there. Has the devil been successful at his scheme? You be the judge.

Does "busy" mean B - Being U - Under S - Satans Y - Yoke Think about it - if you aren't to busy!!!

Now if that story is sometimes true for Christians, which we know it can be, how much truer is it for those who do not know God. People's lives are full of things to do - but they lack the contentment that comes from living lives with real purpose, purpose that flows from living according to the Lord's

commandments. Gypsy Smith's life was full of purpose, the purpose of bringing people to Christ. Let's share what we know about Christ with the people of Waltham Forest, let's encourage them to choose purpose, choose life. **Guide me o thou great Redeemer**

And finally, let's encourage the people of Waltham Forest to make another choice, to choose life, choose peace. We're all very conscious at the moment of the violence in our world. Of violence in Iraq, of terrorist attacks throughout the world, of ethnic violence and civil unrest in many nations of the world. We should be conscious of violence against racial minorities, not least against the gypsy community in this country. A recent Commission for Racial Justice report puts the Gypsy population at about 300,000 and one of the most vulnerable and marginalized ethnic minority groups in Britain. "No travellers" signs can still be seen in pubs and shops. Council no longer have statutory duties to provide gypsy sites, gypsy children are taunted and bullied at school, the media fuel prejudice, an incident in Firle, East Sussex last October saw an effigy of a Gypsy caravan paraded through the streets and burnt as part of bonfire celebrations.

But there is only one way to stop the endless cycle of violence and racial hatred and that is by pursuing the ways of peace. David Lazell's biography of Gypsy Smith recalls one of his most remarkable ventures - the so-called 'Mission of Peace' in South Africa in 1904. The Boer War had left a deep

division between the English and Afrikaner communities, and this was also reflected in their churches. Perhaps because he was seen as not belonging to the English establishment but as somewhat of an outsider, he was able to minister to both communities. And this he did with great effectiveness in missions in all the key cities and towns. Gypsy insisted that all his audiences were to be multi-racial. He wrote of his Capetown mission: 'It was a sight to witness, white and black, rich and poor, British and Dutch, Episcopal and Non-conformist, sitting side by side, and here and there one could see a Malay, with his fez in his hand, listening like the rest. There was no difference - all had sinned and Christ is the Saviour of all.' As Christians today we have a very precious gift to offer our world, a gift the world so badly needs. Violence – whether the violence of international conflict, the violence of racial hatred, the violence of youths on our streets, violence will never be overcome with violence. Hatred and revenge will only bring yet more bloodshed. Deuteronomy 30, verse 15 puts it simply - "today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death". We need courage and may God give us that courage to offer that choice to the people of Waltham Forest. Choose peace. Choose life. **Peace, perfect peace is the gift of Christ our Lord...**

We meet today at the birthplace of Rodney Smith. I am grateful to all of you for joining me here. I warmly thank the Deputy Mayor of Waltham Forest for

honouring us with her presence. I thank members of the Gypsy community and Gypsies for Christ and most especially Uncle Sonnie and Auntie Rosemary. Last year the Ustiben or Romani Gypsy national day was held here and it was as a result of that occasion that I had the privilege of making contact with Sonnie and Rosemary and of hearing more about the terrific work they do for Gypsies for Christ taking the word and practical support to Gypsy communities throughout Europe each summer. I want to thank my grandfather, who spent the 1930s on Romney Marsh living in a shack with his gypsy relatives and who always delighted in reminding his family that we were of Gypsy stock. I thank the Corporation of London for allowing us to meet here and Forest Keeper Ian Kolade who gave me the idea for preaching here today. Above all I give thanks to God for the life of Rodney Smith. We, like him, have got so much to offer others, a message of prosperity, purpose, peace - a simple choice expressed in simple words - its something we can all share with those who do not know the Lord, a truly attractive message, let's take that choice to the people of Waltham Forest - let's honour Rodney Smith by encouraging others to make the choice he made and choose life, choose Jesus Christ. **What a friend we have in Jesus ...**

Steven Saxby, April 2004.