

Choice

Genesis 17:1-7, 18-18

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Did you choose God? Or did God choose you? Your instinct might well be to claim that you chose God. Your instinct might well be that the dignity of human life depends on us having the free will to choose how we live, what we believe, which God we follow.

If that is your thinking then you are well in tune with modern attitudes. I find these days that when I go to see my GP with an ailment he asks me what treatment I would like. I am always tempted to reply

You're the doctor! You tell me!

But I know he asks the question out of a genuine desire to respect my personal freedom, my personal autonomy.

So we might like to believe that we are all here out of free choice and that we are all Christians by choice.

There are two reasons to suppose that it is not so simple. One is common sense; the other is what we read in the bible. And these complications affect how we live, how we engage in mission.

Let us begin with common sense. When we look around us we see evidence that contradicts the simple notion that we chose God. Take for example the people who live in the streets immediately around where I live. Very roughly we are half White British; a quarter of Pakistani origin and a quarter of Indian origin. And by and large the White British people are Christians or of no religion; the Pakistani people are Muslim and the Indian people are Hindu or Sikh.

Perhaps it is an amazing coincidence that two thirds of White British people freely choose to call themselves Christian and hardly any of the Asian people do. Or perhaps it is not a coincidence at all. Perhaps being white or black British means we are very likely to choose Christianity;

perhaps being Asian means we are very likely not to do so. Perhaps the choice is not as free as we like to think. Perhaps our choices are severely limited. Perhaps the choice of our Asian neighbours not to follow Christ is not a choice at all.

If faith is determined in part by where we grew up then there can be no simple assumption that only those who profess the Christian faith will be part of the Kingdom of God. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus follow their own religions not because they have consciously rejected God but because they believe that their own religion truly reveals God – and in some cases they will have come to that conclusion after long and careful thought and prayer.

They are neither wicked nor insincere. But we, as Christians, believe they are mistaken. We believe that God is fully revealed only in Jesus Christ. And one of the facets of God revealed in the Christian faith is that we are not saved by law. We do not earn God's favour any more than Abraham did. We live by grace. And people of other faiths find it hard to hear that because of where and with whom they grew up.

But how do we share that with people of other faiths? How do we get past those layers of culture that lead them to religions other than that of Christ? The answer can only be that we get to know them at the level of our common humanity. Not as White or Black or Asian, but as human beings. That is why when, a few weeks ago, an Imam asked if he could use the Parish Hall for Friday Prayers, Bishop Toby, the PCC and I said we wanted to work to make it happen. And we wanted to make it happen so that we could get to know each other.

And that is dangerous for both sides. Once we get past the Christian and Muslim cultures and come to know each other as human beings, then both sides might begin to understand each others religious beliefs. And once we understand we might even want to adopt them. A Christian might become a Muslim; a Muslim might become a Christian. I am prepared to take that risk because I am confident in my Christian faith. I know that God loves me. I cannot imagine converting to Islam; I can imagine learning from Islam. But of course if it should be the case that Islam is true then I want to discover that and follow Islam.

And this is where the other limitation on our personal freedom comes in. We find this in the reading from Genesis. Here we hear how God chooses Abram and makes a covenant with him: he will give Abram and Sarai numerous decedents, a whole nation will be descended from them. You will have noticed that God does a lot of talking. In fact in the passage we heard a few minute ago Abram says nothing at all. In part of the passage which was omitted today God instructed Abraham to circumcise the males of his family as a sign of this covenant. Abraham's repose is twofold: his laughs in disbelief at the possibility that he and Sarai could have any children. And then he does what God asks and ensures that all the males of his household are circumcised.

Two thousand years later this passage became very important for St Paul. The significance of the passage is this: God took the initiative, God made a promise to Abram and after he had made a commitment to make Abram the father of many children, then he asked Abram to do something in return. Abram was favoured by God because God chose to favour him, not because he had earned it. Abraham had little choice in the matter. God was in charge.

So when I talk to Muslim, which I am afraid is not at all frequent, I do so in the knowledge that God is in charge of our conversation, that God has his hand upon me just as he had it on Abram and Paul.

Knowing that in part my choice is determined by God gives a sense of security, In knowing that I am chosen by God I know that my ultimate fate is not entirely my responsibility. I am loved, I am cared for.

According to Psalm 139, which Muslims and Jews also regard as inspired by God, King David wrote

it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalm 139:13-14

The prophet Isaiah recorded the words he believed he had been given by

God

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

Isaiah 43:2-3

These words are not just for King David; not just for the people of Isaiah's nation and generation: they are for me and for you. Whatever I do, whatever you do, wherever you go, God will be with you.

If God's choice of me is of greater significance than my choice of God, then I can engage with Muslims and any other faith without fear. I will not be corrupted, I will not be misled because God's Holy Spirit will guide me, indeed choose me.

It was, of course, that same certainty that gave Jesus the courage to face the cross. And he expected his followers to have the same certainty. What it means to deny ourselves and take up my cross will be different for every one of us. But we do so in the knowledge that God has chosen us and that we are in his hands.

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