

## Choices!

Joshua 24<sup>1-2</sup>; Psalm 34<sup>15-end</sup>; Ephesians 6<sup>10-20</sup>; John 6<sup>56-69</sup>

Choose this day whom you will serve. [Joshua 24<sup>15</sup>]

The doctrine of Freewill is one of the things that can be difficult to get our heads round. Are we free to make our own decisions or does God make them for us? We certainly feel free, but the problem is that, if we are free, God must accept what we decide and isn't then in control, or if God is in charge, we have to accept what he chooses for us. But those choices don't just affect us – it is more complex than that.

When I used to introduce this to A level students the example I suggested to them that I was a naturist. If I exercised my freedom to be a naturist and arrived in the classroom in my birthday suit that was evidence of my freewill. However, that then limited their freewill. They may not have chosen to see what they would had I been naked. My exercise of freewill limited theirs, or theirs (if they chose not to allow me to be a naturist) limited mine.

In our readings for today, in the Gospel, Jesus says, **I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by my Father**, but in Joshua we have the challenged to the Hebrew, **choose this day whom you will serve** (which he follows up with his decision: **as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord**).

Shortcutting (perhaps even short-circuiting) a long history in theology, I would suggest that the most accessible response is that God certainly chooses us, but the challenge is that we have to go on choosing him and his way.

- ✘ The Hebrews had, as they usually did, managed to get distracted by the 'things' people worshipped that they had encountered during their travels. God had, from Abraham, chosen them to be his people. How much easier it is to focus on something you can see and touch and in whose worship you can do what you like because you make up the rules, rather than to worship the invisible God of the Hebrews whose rules are restrictive. Yet, reminded of God's faithfulness along their journey, they too say, **we will serve the lord, for his is our God**.

When we are tempted to make the wrong choices, frustrated (perhaps) because the path of discipleship is hard, we need to look back. Had the hymns been chosen after I had written the sermon, we may have sung, *When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed.... Count your Blessings!* And we are called back to the choice, **we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God!**

- ✘ Paul, too, was aware that he had been chosen in Christ, just as we are. Yet he was faced with the difficult choice of what he was going to say when he was on trial for his life because he was a Christian. He knows that he will be executed – and he was beheaded in 64 (just after the Great Fire in Rome and in the last year of Nero's reign) – which is why the end of the Epistle to the Ephesians has the emphasis on being **able to stand** and **boldness**.

The problem that Paul highlights is that the struggle we all face is complicated because the Devil takes an interest in us making the wrong choices. That doesn't change the fact that God has chosen us, but it can make us doubt it.

Two things are provided for us to help us, but we must choose to use them.

- First, we have the **whole armour of God** (Paul obviously inspired by his guard). The **belt of truth** helps us respond to the Devils' lies; the **breastplate of righteousness** reminds us that God has declared us acquitted of sin; the **shoes of the gospel of peace** remind us of the wholeness we have in God (the Roman Army had discovered how important feet were and so provided shoes); the **shield of faith** is there specifically to **quench the flaming arrows of the evil one**; the **sword of the Spirit, the word of God** gives us something to fight back with (remember Jesus, when tempted, replied **it is written**).
- Second, we have **prayer**, in which we can be honest with God about ourselves and support others too.

God has chosen us – that choice is never in doubt (whatever the Devil says). We then have to make the right choices. That means I won't turn up naked for services – but, with Joshua, **as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!** Will you respond, **we will serve the lord, for his is our God?**