

Lent 2 All Souls' THE STORY, OUR STORY, MY STORY **GOD CHOSE US** dtw

God said to Abram, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them". Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be". And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15.5-6)

The biblical themes of righteousness and justification which pervade both the OT and NT go right back to Genesis and these words: Abram '*...believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*' (Gen 15.6) Originally, they signified 'the acceptable norm' in human conduct and that norm is the very character of God in whose image we are made. The idea conveyed in them is certainly ethical, but there is a steady movement in these themes, particularly through the justice writings of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE prophets including Isaiah, towards a state of blessedness and salvation. It continues to be progressed through the justice teaching of Jesus and culminates in Paul's theology of Justification by Faith. God chose and called Abraham by name; even changed his name as a sign of his calling, God chose and called Saul who became Paul, who today reminds us through his letter to the Philippians, that 'our citizenship is in heaven'. We are the People of a Story not of our own choosing,

However, today we live in a society that celebrates 'freedom of choice'. And why not? Finance institutions and superannuation funds continue to pride themselves on the power of choice they reckon on giving to the customer. So do companies like Myer and Harvey Norman. Indeed, the western world seems to value highly the ideal of freedom of choice; after all, isn't that what a liberal democracy is all about? – your choice of political party (don't forget to vote!), career, belief, house, children – heavens, now prospective parents can even choose the sex of their child at a price. For many people today, they would say that their human freedom is *defined* by their power to choose.

Yet, in our relationship with God, God's initial choice of us is prior to and of greater consequence than our choice of God. Isn't it good, salutary, even a relief to know that *God chose us*? In John's first letter, we heard the words, 'We love because God first loved us' and in John's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "You did not choose me; I chose you." (Jn 15.16) This of course is the foundational reason, the foundation grace for baptism and why Orthodox, Catholic Faith in which we Anglicans partake, endorses the baptism of infants (as well as adults) – in keeping with the heritage of Jewish theology.

However, the thing that bothers me about the present worldview is that many of us have lost the sense of our lives as *Gift*. We have become our own creations. The cult of individualism is rife, and right is might even if a 'right' is morally or ethically wrong. For much of post-modern society life is no longer God's gift, now it is a matter of my rights or choice. An individual, according to the definitions of new world thinking, is someone who thinks that she or he is answerable to no story other than the one which she or he has personally chosen. Determined *not* to be determined by tradition, family, tribe, community, the post-modern person can tend to feel authentic only when there is a severing of ties with prior claims of tradition, family and community in order to 'think for myself'. Earlier, people got their stories from their parents, or their church, or town, or rural community, and they lived them as best they could. Adam Smith perceptibly noticed that the modern world detached people from such parental determinism and enabled them to choose their own jobs, to become creators of their own lives. No longer was someone a blacksmith because dad was one and the name was Smith. Now we were free, free to choose. In fact, for the first time in history, writers began defining freedom

as *choice*. We can want to be people who have no story for our lives other than the story we have chosen. Yet this is also a story, albeit a corrupt one. Peter Berger, the social analyst, called this the 'heretical imperative'. We are all now fated to choose, to make up our own lives as we go. I knew a Merchant Bank that crashed in Perth at the time of the late 80's World Crash, whose trendy catch phrase was *Creating the Power of Choice*. A life without choice is considered to be no life at all.

Yet I believe that one reason why loneliness, alienation, fragmentation, low self-esteem, even suicide, appear to plague our lives today in unparalleled proportions is that this thinking has a way of making us all strangers – strangers without a story, without connections or roots. (The people of Ukraine, Gaza, the West Bank and other places, have not just being bombed and dispossessed of their homes; they have been dispossessed of their *story*) When my master-story is that I have no story other than the one I have personally chosen, then there is little to relate me to you and I am not half as free as I claim to be. And you do not know me anymore – we have nothing in common – we have no *comm-unity* – let alone HOLY COMMUNION with an intimate ABBA – a First Love – the One of First Choosing of you and me into a Community of Divine Love, one with another, child-and-brooding-Mother, as Jesus describes a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. (Lk 13.34)

Jesus said to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you....and appointed you to go and bear fruit." Think about that. He reminds his disciples in that same passage about the common vine that their discipleship was not their idea, not by their choice, any more than they chose their own parents, cut their own umbilical cords, or decided as toddlers to get a good education. Rather, they are related to him, they have big jobs in the Kingdom, *because he has chosen them*. I believe that there is a word of comfort here for those in a world of alleged freedom of choice. I don't always feel like a Christian; I don't always look like a Christian. But thanks be to God, according to John 15.16, *my appearance, feelings and actions are not the primary or final determination of my status with God*. I am here, not because of who I am, but because of **who God is**. God has chosen me, appointed me, given me the grace to bear fruit in God's name. Now that's good news. Jesus comes to his often struggling, fearful, anxious followers telling them in effect, "Relax, this isn't your idea. It's mine. And I'll be with you all the way." Christianity itself is not a story we have chosen, something about which we first decided. *It chose us*. We have been embraced by this story from outside our own limited experiences. This is an external word which someone had to speak to us for us to discover it. So, in a real sense, we don't discover the Gospel; it discovers us and then, in the words of Noel Paul Stookey, we simply become "the instruments for something that has to be said", and be said, it will. We are not our own. We are God's children. God has called us by name. We belong to God's Tribe, the Community of Christ. This is our Story.

### **For Personal or Group Reflection**

1. What does 'justification by faith' mean to/for you in your own Christian journey?
2. Why is 'freedom of choice' such a big thing for many people today?
3. Think of how you may have experienced unconditional grace or love in your life.
4. How does Jesus' imagery of a hen gathering her brood under her wings appeal to you?
5. Are you aware of anybody who feels 'unconnected' or 'out on a limb' in life?
6. Do you find more 'identity' being a part of a Christian Community? This Church Community?
7. Can you think of a time or occasion(s) where you 'became an instrument for something that had to be said'? Or done?
8. Conclude with a prayer for Christians persecuted for their faith, or in dangerous places.