You did not choose me but I chose you

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo to the Diocese of Guildford for Sunday 8th May 2021, Easter 6.

**John 15:9-17**

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Congrats to St Paul’s Egham Hythe celebrating their 90th anniversary this weekend...

No Paul in my sermon today – rather words from Jesus in John’s gospel, 15:16.

***You did not choose me,***– said Jesus***– but I chose you.***

This feels to me a shockingly contemporary word from Jesus, a contradiction of a subject close to our hearts. Jesus may have said it to the disciples in that upper room at a time of foreboding, clearly it was a memorable statement recorded by John nearly 2000 years ago for every disciple in every generation to follow, yet I find myself wondering if it has never been more apt – or offered such paradox – as for our generation.

In the West, we’re a generation where freedom is defined by choice. Wealth is measured in the number of choices available, capitalism runs on envy - assuming I will pay more for what I haven’t yet got. For those of us lucky enough to be born in the West, we have the *choice* to take the vaccine – unlike our brothers and sisters suffering in India just now who (quite literally) dying for the opportunity they long for.

Those of you listening to me will, I expect, count yourselves fortunate to be those who have been presented with the claims of the gospel in such a way that you had the opportunity to make the *choice* of following Jesus – of being baptised, of finding forgiveness, of committing yourself to the way of the cross. Not least *because* I grew up in a church milieu that *choice* to recognise the truth claim of that which I’d imbibed felt all the more important. For me the stakes were high when I decided to go ahead and be confirmed at 13; and when at a summer camp a few years later I realised the claims of the gospel were more demanding, more radical, than I’d previously embraced, and I committed myself again. As if I went over in ink the *choice* that I’d made to follow Jesus previously which had been more like pencil, a little more tentative. And I’d dare to say that following Jesus is a continual ongoing *choice*, every time we get out of bed, every time we kneel to pray, every time we review how we spend or give away our money. There’s no doubt that following Jesus doesn’t just happen: you don’t become a tomato just because you live in a greenhouse, you don’t become a car because you spend each night in a garage. So the adage went, you don’t become a Christian just by hanging out in the church (though it’s a pretty good place to start, and to lurk, to watch and learn from other ChristiansI). But, it takes some intentionality on our part to choose Jesus – especially to follow him this far, to the Upper Room the night before the cross.

Yet, Jesus says, reversing our whole perspective, you did not choose me but I chose you. You can imagine the disciples recalling the actual story of their callings – where Jesus invited Andrew and Philip to leave the fishing nets, where he called across to James and John by name; where he caused a stir by inviting Matthew the tax collector. They were chosen – and yet, for sure, they also chose.

For us, who may not be aware of such a literal experience of calling from Jesus, this relativises our sense of autonomy, that sense of choice over which we kid ourselves we have control. Jesus is widening our horizon to help us get over ourselves, to help us get beyond the narcissism that views the world from an assumption that I’m at the centre.

No, Jesus is at the centre. I was able to choose Jesus because, I discover, he first chose me. The technical term for this is God’s prevenient grace: which is to say that long before any of us were born, were twinkles in our parents eyes, long before our parents’ parents’ parents’ to the Xth generation ever existed, long before we were, God the great ‘I am’ *was*. This is not just saying that while we were still sinners Christ died for us – though that is true. Nor is it saying that before each of us was born God knit us together in our mother’s womb – though that is also true. This is saying that from the very beginning of time God the Creator wanted us to be: God the Father was disposed to be *for* us, God the Holy Spirit was *with* us, God in Jesus was coming *to* us. To point out that before we chose God, God the Holy Trinity chose us, chose to *create* us, chose to *call* us, chose to *partner* with us and work *through* us to fulfil the divine purposes, chose to be *for* us even though we weren’t necessarily responsive, chose to be *with* us even though we aren’t always very hospitable, chose to *die* for us even though most of those for whom he died don’t even realise it.

**You did not choose me but I chose you.**

What does this perspective mean, besides putting our sense of autonomy and control in its place?

It encourages us to rely on God’s grace, to trust in God’s favour. The success of the church doesn’t rely on me. Yes, the next thing Jesus says is ‘go and bear fruit, fruit that will last’ but perhaps it suggests that the fruitfulness of my discipleship doesn’t all depend on me. I can mess up without everything going awry. If I let God down that won’t change God’s fundamental disposition towards me. My children used to have a book with the title, ‘Even if I did something awful?’ ‘Even if I did something awful, would you still love me?’ Yes, God still loves us, and chooses us, even when if we do something awful. Even *when* we do something awful. God’s choice of us is an absolute given. It’s only our choice of God that’s wobbly.

**You did not choose me but I chose you.**

I want to suggest this means that we can deal with uncertainty. We can weather the crisis of this pandemic. It means we can dare, we can risk. We are freed from the false securities and the deep anxieties of the world that we create when we kid ourselves that my choices are the defining ones - the spouse I’ve chosen, the house I’ve bought, the children I’ve raised, the future I’ve paved. My choices are small-fry, and they are flakey next to the Big-Time choices of God: to create us, to redeem us, to call us. Jesus’ more fundamental choice of us reveals the fallacy of a society that makes individualism its organising principle and material comforts its chief insurance. The uncertainty of our times is seismic to those whose temporal choices are everything. But to those of us who hear these words of Jesus, we are freed: to rely on the deeper divine choice that does not change, even when the tectonic plates of our world appear to change.

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Finally I want to say that Jesus’ prior choice of us lifts from us the burden to succeed. It is not that God’s choice of us does not come with expectations – just as the election of Israel came with expectations. We are chosen not for privilege but for service – to bring blessing, to bear fruit that will last. But that choice does not depend on our fruitfulness – rather the choice enables it by freeing us. Just like the stipend for clergy is the given that prevents us from worrying about how we’re going to buy food so we are freed for service, so Jesus’ reminder that he first chose us to be his partners, to convey the abundance of God’s blessing in a world of scarcity. Nevermind if we’re small in number, nevermind if others look down on us, nevermind if we don’t have the scope of influence we used to have or we long to have. Stop the whinging, the whining. ‘You are a chosen people, a holy nation, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his glorious light’, says Peter in his first letter. Go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. That’s not the same as saying fruit that you can see, success that will make you feel good. It’s saying keep on keeping on – be freed from the burden to succeed – because ultimately you’re not in charge. Thank the Lord, Jesus is.

I want to end with a picture. It’s an icon that sits just behind the altar in the chapel of Westcott House, a theological college in Cambridge. You see an image of the Saviour’s face, a classic stylized image that goes back about 1500 years, depicting Christ as the Pantocrator, the ‘Ruler of All’. Normally in those images Christ has his hand up in blessing: but here he’s holding an open Bible in one hand and with the other he is pointing to these words: **You did not choose me, but I chose you**.



In Orthodox theology, icons have a special place in enabling the faithful to reflect on the meaning and the reality of the incarnation. God has shown his face to us in Jesus Christ. When we look on the face of Christ, our eyes are opened to the revelation of God. At the most basic level, the icon tells us that it is through our relationship with Christ that the scriptures are opened to us.

What else does this icon say? In a little book called *The Dwelling of the Light*Rowan Williams offers this further reflection: “Face to face with Jesus, there and only there, do we find who we are. We have been created to mirror his life, the eternal life of the one turned always towards the overflowing love of the Father; but our human existence constantly turns away. When we look at Jesus, we see in some measure what he sees, and are drawn to where his eyes lead us….When we look at him looking at us, we see both what we were made to be, bearers of the divine image and likeness, and what we have made of ourselves.”

Williams is making the point that it is God who initiates and sustains our relationship with him. In spite of the fact that God has even *chosen* the likes of you and me, we are often tempted to reject his invitation and to turn away. We think that we must be unworthy: ‘Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin’, as George Herbert memorably puts it. And yet, even at the point of greatest pressure, greatest test, arguably greatest failure, Jesus affirms a different story. A story of God’s foundational delight in each one of us. Remember, **you did not choose me but I chose you.**