
Making Choices

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 9 February 2025

Isaiah 6:1-8 • 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 • Luke 5:1-11



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's lessons are about choosing. We all make choices all the time, all day, every day. I chose what to have for breakfast this morning. I chose what clothes to put on today — well, actually, it's pretty much the same thing I wear every Sunday! That's a great thing about being a priest: it makes for a much simpler wardrobe! Hmmm ... black shirt, or ... black shirt? But even then, I could wear a blue or a grey clergy shirt, like I do during the week. But on Sundays, I *choose* to wear a black shirt.

There are of course many more important choices. We chose to come to New Zealand. I chose to apply for the position here in this parish. You all will have made choices about where to live, where to work, where to send the children to

school. These are the choices which set us up, and affect our lives for years to come.

God makes choices, and we see two examples in the Old Testament and the Gospel. In the first reading, Isaiah volunteers to go and do God's will. Isaiah has already been chosen, although he didn't know that at first. If it were not so, God would not have asked the question he did — "Who will be our messenger?" — in Isaiah's hearing. The choice has been made for Isaiah. Similarly for Simon Peter and James and John in the fishing boat. Jesus chooses them, and in both cases, those who are chosen accept and follow.

Which all brings to my mind three things about choosing:

- Does God guide, but not determine, our choices?
- Has God made all our choices for us long ago?
- Do we have any control over our choices?

First, does God guide our choices? Definitely yes. If we are attentive to God, if we are open to and in good relationship with God, we will receive guidance. What is the form of that guidance? It might be a little voice in our heads. Some people can hear God's voice when they pray. I am not one of them, but maybe some of you are. That is a wonderful gift, to hear the voice of God. I expect it's difficult to describe, but maybe you can, if you have heard it.

Guidance may be in the form of opportunities presenting themselves. I have been guided in this way. Melissa and I had not spent much time in New Zealand (this is back around 2007) when we thought we would look into getting a place here, so we could spend more time. An open house for a flat came to our attention, and it was perfect — what the business folks call a turn-key operation. A flat with furniture, a car, bicycles and other items, all for sale, within walking distance of the Cathedral, where we were worshipping at the time. We truly felt it was God guiding to take that step, our first real step toward residence in this country. Again, when we returned to NZ after a few years back in the US, an opening for an interim position at Fendalton, followed by the position here, presented themselves. Maybe that was less remarkable, as there is a shortage of priests in this Diocese! But still, our path was made straight to the place where we are now. Notice, though, that this was just guidance. We could have ignored the open house listing; we didn't need to take up the position here. We could have said no to those things.

Or could we? Could it be that God has determined all these choices long ago, even before our lives began? This is the idea of predestination, which is an attractive idea. It is supported by the fact that we know God is omniscient — God knows all, before it happens. With such complete knowledge, God might

be planning every move we make, and we only think we have autonomy in our choices.

Yet most Biblical scholars believe we do have free choice, in our actions, and most importantly, in our beliefs. When we hear the Gospel, we can choose to believe it, or ignore it. We can choose to follow Christ, or not. This is shown to us by Christ himself. When he walked the earth, preaching to the crowds and doing miracles among the people, did he try to force his ministry on them? Did he compel his disciples to follow him? Look at his choice of words to Simon Peter and his fellow fishermen: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” That’s the old King James version; our modern version calls it “catching people.” But the idea is the same. Fishing is not compelling; fishing is inviting. The fish may grab at the bait, or not, as it may be. Jesus was undoubtedly very persuasive, very compelling. Can you imagine meeting Jesus the man face to face? I imagine his manner to be one of intensity, mixed with kindness. You would want to follow him, as those fishermen did.

Since God gives us the choice to follow him or not, to make the choice about something so important and literally life-changing as faith, I cannot believe that everything else we do is pre-determined. Why would God pre-determine everything except the most important thing? Yet God knows everything we will do before we do it. It is a bit of a paradox, and one which we may not understand until we are face-to-face with God.

God created us for his pleasure. God knows that we will do some great things, and some stupid things; some good and kind things, and some bad and evil things — and we will be free to do them — but if we are right with God, God will guide us to the great and good. And as proof of the confidence God has in us, his children, we are invited to take part in God’s great project of telling the world about his love and salvation. That is our commission. Jesus would not entrust us with it if he thought we couldn’t or wouldn’t do it.

I know that I have been placed here so that I might do my share in that great work. I am not forced, but I am guided. I am not compelled, but I am given opportunities. So, I believe, it is with all of us, as we continue to live our lives in the grace and love of our Creator. Amen.