

(Acts 9.1-6, Ps 30, Rev 5.6-14, John 21.1-19)

Choosing the Way

I was in the supermarket the other day and I had a very disturbing moment as I was choosing some liquid soap to refill my containers at home. There were 6 shelves of every possible brand and scent before me. I went into choice overload. What was I going to choose and how? On price, brand, value for money, smell, colour, environmental credentials, was it made in Australia, how do you decide this stuff? Does it matter?

I stood there for a while struggling with the choice and ended up feeling completely stupid. I mean how hard is it to choose liquid soap? I did finally choose but the whole experience brought to mind what I think is our very modern dilemma - overwhelming choice. Have you noticed just how much stuff there is in shops these days to buy? Racks and racks, shelves and shelves of variations of the same thing, over and over again.

Have you noticed too how many different ways are offered to enlightenment and salvation or at least some sort of experience with the transcendent? Open up any woman's magazine and check out the 4 pages of clairvoyants, astrologers and fortunetellers. Walk through any bookstore and peruse the self-help and spirituality sections. Open up the street directory, look under churches and notice all the multi-faith, multi-denominational choices available. There are so many ways to go, so many paths to follow, so many different options.

In the first reading we hear how around two thousand years ago a brand new path was opened up for a man called Saul whom we know as, Paul, the great evangelist of the early church, a key character in the Acts of the Apostles and the writer of most of the epistles. Paul began as Saul and he was a zealous protector of his religion.

In modern language Saul was a religious fundamentalist, a violent person of dangerous belief. As David Hume notes, when supreme conviction is threatened it turns nasty. Saul was a nasty, violent man and he justified his attitudes and actions with his religion. Yet something extraordinary happens to Saul. He is on the road to Damascus, where he was intentionally going to discover more Christians and have them arrested and executed. But on this path he has an experience of the risen Jesus who calls him by name. Saul/ Paul is presented with a choice and he chooses the Way of Christ.

Like Saul we are moving in a particular direction and we have multiple choices. How do we end up choosing one path over another? I for one ended up choosing the way of Christ because out of all the other things I had tried – and I had tried a veritable cornucopia of experiences, a supermarket of philosophies and spiritual pathways – out of all those possibilities the Christian way was the one that made the most sense, was the most internally coherent and perhaps most importantly it truly brought me home to God and my true self via the way of Christ.

Deciding to follow the path might seem initially as if you are limiting your choices and following a pre-determined path that confines and hedges you in. Saul who became Paul had to give up one way of life to take up another. Maybe he had questions and concerns as well. However Paul went on to discover the extraordinary freedom in believing in Christ. It is not about

doffing your cap to dogma and doctrine, it is more like plunging into a deep wide river that embraces you and takes you to places you never thought possible.

But as we know it takes you there by strange ways and means, ways that at times you cannot understand. There are hints of this in today's gospel. After the resurrection Jesus has again appeared to the disciples. There were just seven disciples at this third resurrection appearance but it is Jesus conversation with Peter that is centre stage in this account.

Peter is the spontaneous man of action in the Gospels. He is the disciple who runs to the empty tomb. He is the one who in this scene was the first to recognize Jesus. He jumps into the water and swims to get to him. After breakfast, a breakfast Jesus has cooked for all of them, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" When Peter says he does, Jesus says "Then feed my sheep". They go through this a few more times with Peter getting more and more frustrated as Jesus keeps asking the same question and requesting the same response. Jesus finally tells Peter that eventually he will be lead somewhere he does not really want to go, that something will be demanded of him that he did not want. And then Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me".

As it was Peter so it is for us - we are called to follow and the centre of the way, the journey, is a connection with Jesus Christ. There is someone to follow and some one to be challenged by. The one we follow is completely loving and forgiving Lord. In the story of both Peter and Paul, Jesus is the one who forgives, who stands there offering unconditional love, who longs to eat and drink with his worst enemy. Both Peter and Paul have failed God and the basic tenets of their Jewish faith. One denied him after promising never to do so. The other persecuted Jesus followers and was the cause of their suffering

and death. Yet Jesus brings peace, he loves and he forgives. He is our brother and friend but also our conscience if you like, always leading us in the direction of truth and light. If we stop and listen we can begin to discern what the next right action will be.

And what Jesus would have us do is very clearly spelt out three times in this passage – “Feed my sheep”, or another way of saying it is “feed my children”, “Feed those whom I love, those who I care for”. There are of course many ways to interpret this and live it out. But feeding, at least to my mind, is about giving nourishment to someone, helping them to find fullness of life, to feed them with whatever will enable them to live life to the fullest.

Sometimes that is actual food. Sometimes it is emotional support.

Sometimes it is using our gifts and talents to make a difference. Sometimes it is spiritual sustenance. Sometimes it is nothing because sometimes the best you can do for a person is to lovingly leave them alone.

To follow Jesus is to have a relationship with him in some way. To follow Jesus is to bring nourishment to those he cares for. But to follow Jesus means to go where we may not necessarily want to go. Following Jesus means the cross as well as the resurrection. Following in the path of Jesus means dying to a whole lot of things in ourselves – the ideas we have about ourselves, our fears and assumptions most of all. It means dying to something but also living for and to something life-giving, good and true. It means dying to certainty and conviction and living in the liminal space of openness to God’s call and love. It can mean physical suffering and perhaps death.

My daughter, when young, once said to me about my faith, “But Mummy, what if it is not true, What if you die and there is no god, no heaven, what then”?

I replied, "Well if it is not true I would have lived the most wonderful life, I would have dreamed the most glorious possibilities and lived my way down into them, my life would have been full of meaning, and love and joy. I would have journeyed with the friend and brother of my heart, Jesus Christ, and that would be enough, that would be OK".

It is the journey that is important, not the destination. It is the God we choose to follow, each and every day, that creates our reality. May our journey together bring life and nourishment to others. Amen