

Making Choices

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Once, I went out with a group of men for a counter meal. It was an excellent place, with a large, extensive menu and many fine dishes. I found myself sitting with another fellow in his late 30s whom I had started to get to know over the period since we had first met a year prior. What are you going to have? I asked as I pondered the menu. A look of terror came over his face. "I can't choose", he said, "I can never make a decision as far as menus are concerned - you choose something for me". Then his terror came to me - I am hardly game to choose something for my wife, let alone someone I barely knew. Eventually, we settled on fish and chips.

Making a decision is what the first reading is all about. It is a story from the very beginnings of the nation of Israel. They had left Egypt with many signs and wonders, and after wandering through the wilderness with Moses as their leader, they crossed the Jordan after Moses' death with Joshua at the helm. Under the guidance of Joshua and the providence of God, they had taken over the land we now know as Israel and were preparing to settle down.

Joshua assembled them before him and, in his valedictory address to them, put before them the challenge:

Therefore, revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now, if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

This was to be a day of decision. In the same way that the Australian people were given in the recent referendum to vote Yes or No, so were the people given the choice - to say yes to God or to reject him.

Perhaps it was easy for them. God had been visible amongst them. He had driven out their enemies, he had provided them with miraculous food, and they had crossed the river on dry land. A very active and present God in the lives of these people is it any wonder that they responded: *"Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore, we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."*

But this is more than just a nice story to tell the children. It is a story that has a point. It is almost the essence of the Christian Message - Choice is fundamental - We do not drift into Christianity or inherit it. Our Christianity is our choice of God (and his son Jesus) to the exclusion of all else. It matters not what our parents were - what our partners do - or even where we are. Christianity is an individual choice. Unlike the story we have heard today - it is the choice not made on one day but on each day of our lives. It is as if I get up each day and say, "Today, I will serve the Lord".

When we bring a child for Baptism, they are usually a little too young to make any choice at all. So how is it that his parents can do so? His parents, as an act of love, have enlisted the help of

a few friends to choose on behalf of the child that they might one day fulfil. They are choosing the side of God for them, which is beautiful. It may be the greatest gift. But this will only be meaningful if the child can make this choice for themselves. The child can only claim the inheritance of baptism to this day once they reaffirm this in the act of confirmation.

Their parents and Godparents start to prepare them to make this choice at some stage. Although the church should try to help, it is the primary responsibility of parents and Godparents. This is a challenging task, and we are tempted to push them towards faith - through Sunday school or a youth group. But there is a better way. Let me tell you a short story to illustrate...

A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and four-year-old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered. The family ate together at the table. But the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk spilled on the tablecloth. The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess. "We must do something about Grandfather," said the son. "I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor."

So, the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. Their grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner. Since Grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl. When the family glanced in Grandfather's direction, sometimes he had a tear in his eye as he sat alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence.

One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. he asked the child sweetly, "What are you making?" The boy sweetly responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and Mama to eat your food in when I grow up." The four-year-old smiled and went back to work.

The words so struck the parents that they were speechless. Then tears started to stream down their cheeks. Though no word was spoken, both knew what must be done.

The husband took Grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table that evening. He ate every meal with the family for the remainder of his days. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth soiled.

How should we promote the faith? Children are remarkably perceptive. Their eyes ever observe, their ears ever listen, and their minds ever process the messages they absorb. If they see us patiently providing a happy home atmosphere for family members, they will imitate that attitude for the rest of their lives. The wise parent realises that the building blocks are being laid daily for the child's future. Let's be wise builders.

Parents and Godparents, to fulfil your promises, it is vital that you point the child in the direction of faith and demonstrate this in your own lives. Indeed, each parent here has that responsibility - to live in a way that will show our children the choices we make.

So, although baptism is a day of choice on behalf of the child. In Baptism, the path to follow God is chosen for the child, but for each person here, we must choose this day whom we will serve.

Let us pray that we dare to choose God and have the strength to live out the consequences of this choice.

AMEN