Sermon Amersham Free Church Easter 3 23 April 2023

*1 Peter 1:17-23* Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Julian Templeton, Training and Development Officer, Thames North Synod, United Reformed Church

My message today is, *being chosen by God frees us to choose what is good*. I will first explore some of the everyday choices that we are faced with. Then, I will explore what God’s choosing of us might mean for the way we exercise our choices. Finally, I will return to those everyday choices and say that God’s choosing us to be holy and dearly loved empowers us to choose what is good.

 I wonder how many people this morning experienced ‘wardrobe anxiety’? Perhaps we opened the wardrobe, looked at the garments hanging in it, and found it difficult to decide which one to wear. Perhaps some of us tried on one garment, or combination of garments, looked at ourselves in the mirror and thought: ‘No, that won’t do!’ So, we tried on another, or another combination. Eventually, though, we made our choice, and here we all are. And, if I may say so, what an excellent choice you each have made!

 For me, this morning, the choice was very straightforward. When Ian emailed me in advance about taking part in this service, he helpfully added that he is in the practice of wearing robes. And when I read this, I thought, ‘Great! I’ll wear mine also; wardrobe decision made!’ That is the benefit of adopting a uniform. However, in wearing a cassock and gown, Ian and I can hardly be said to be ‘dedicated followers of fashion’! Consequently, we may not be the best people to help those experiencing wardrobe anxiety. Nonetheless, I would like to offer some help by exploring the nature of choices and decisions.

 On Easter Day, Ian included in his sermon the following message:

The Spirit of Jesus lives on every day in our world . . . [t]hrough those moments when women and men positively choose love over hate, light over darkness and hope over despair.

Today I want to explore the power of positive choice, the choice to do what is good, and I will argue that being chosen by God frees us to choose what is good. My message is based on the First Letter of Peter, whose author writes to the scattered people of God, reminding them that they have been chosen and freed from futile ways by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ was predestined before the foundation of the world to be the revelation of God’s grace, through whom people would trust God, be born again, and love one another (1:1-2, 19-23; 5:12).

 Today, many of us have choices that would have astounded our grandparents or great grandparents. Supermarket foods, television programmes, products of every kind, many of which we can order at the click of a button. Yet, I’m not convinced that having such a vast range of choice necessarily makes choosing any easier, nor, in the end, makes us any happier.

 The ability to purchase what we choose, however, is dictated by how much money we have. Those on a low income have a much-reduced choice. One of the cruelties of the cost-of-living crisis is that the low-income shopper is presented with aisles of shelves stocked with products; but, in fact, what can be afforded is the narrow range of the cheapest; or for others, what a food bank or charity gives. Poverty drastically reduces choice, and whatever one’s political affiliation, as Christians we are commanded to do what we can to relieve the effects of poverty.

 When, in Reformed theology, we speak about choice, we often speak in terms of *election*. God chooses by electing. For instance, God elects the Israelite people by making the covenant with them: ‘I will be your God, and you will be my people.’ God elects Jesus of Nazareth, saying at his Baptism, ‘You are my beloved Son.’ And God elects the Church, as the author of 1 Peter writes at the beginning of his letter, the Church is “chosen in the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the consecrating work of the Holy Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ.” (1:2).

 Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed theologian who was the subject of my doctoral study, wrote: “...every choice and decision made in human history...is [secondary] to the choice and decision made in God’s eternity before all created being and its time, i.e., that Jesus Christ was elected by God, and we [have been chosen] in Him.” (*Church Dogmatics* III/2, 484). Barth believed that “The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all words that can be said or heard it is the best: that God elects [humankind]; that God [exists] for [humankind as] . . . the One who loves in freedom.” (*CD* II/2, 3). Yet “election, like freedom, is not shapeless and arbitrary: it is to a particular end. There is a counterpart to God’s election . . . and it consists in the fact that [the human person] . . . can . . . elect God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 The doctrine of election teaches us that choosing has a shape and a purpose. The first part of that shape is God’s choosing of Jesus Christ. As Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost to the assembled crowd: “God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2:36). In this season of Easter, we celebrate that the risen Jesus Christ has a cosmic importance for humankind and for Creation: the risen Christ is the New Creation in whom we find our true humanity and true creaturehood. The second part of the shape of election is the way in which Christ’s humanity shapes our humanity. The Apostle Paul put it this way. “You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, you will also appear with him in glory.” (Col. 3:3-4). And elsewhere Paul writes: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20). In other words, becoming a Christian is a matter of dying to the old self and coming alive by faith to the new self, shaped by Christ, and shaped by living in the fellowship Church. And note that Paul writes about the life of faith he lives “in the body.” Our embodied existence is to be lived primarily “by faith, not by sight.” (2 Cor. 5:7). Faith creates the freedom to make good choices, because “in [Christ] we are really free, [for] He is Himself our direction, our guiding into freedom, our awakening to life in that freedom, our guidance to make use of it.” (Barth, *CD* IV/1, 101)

 How does all this help with the vexed issue of wardrobe anxiety with which I began? Well, I wonder whether part of our anxiety about the clothes we wear has to do with wanting to present one’s best face to the world, and being worried that my choice of clothing does not always present me in the best possible light. Is it, in other words, an issue about ‘What will people think of me?’ I think that this reflects an aspect of our evolutionary biology that we cannot escape completely. That is, the human animal has evolved in common with other animals with biological need to find a mate and reproduce. Consequently, being drawn towards physical attractiveness is part of that biological imperative. However, recent studies have shown that how one looks is only one component of what attracts us to another person. What proves to be more important is *character.* More important than superficial attractiveness is whether a person is reliable and loving and good. And what this means is that what really counts in life is not so much the garments we wear as it is qualities of character that we wear and that become part of who we are. The Apostle Paul writes: “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Col. 3:12). In the end, what matters most is not what other people think of us but what *God* thinks of us. God our heavenly Father regards us as beloved sons and daughters who are ‘chosen, holy, and dearly loved.’ Just consider that: we are ‘chosen, holy, and dearly loved’! That liberating good news gives us security. The person that matters, the real ‘you’, is who you are in Jesus Christ: chosen, holy, and dearly loved by God. And in the same way that the good regard and love of a spouse, friend, or associate empowers us to live up to that good regard and love; so, in a more fundamental way, God’s good regard in choosing us to be holy and dearly loved empowers us to choose what is good.

 Not all our choices may turn out to be good choices. Part of being human is having the freedom to make unwise choices and to *learn* from them. Learning, in turn, is the fundamental attitude of the disciple, for whom repentance is the process of adjusting to reality as we find it. Yet, we adjust *as* those whom God dearly loves, makes holy, and has chosen.

Thanks be to God.

1. Colin Gunton, ‘The triune God and the freedom of the creature’ in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, 51, Stephen Sykes (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; see also Barth, *CD* II/2, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)