

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday before Lent 2017
 Revd Steven Rothwell

The film *Trainspotting* made an impact when it was released 20 years ago. The memorable opening sequence of the film depicted a group of young men running through the streets of Edinburgh and one of the characters, Renton, delivering the following monologue (Expletives deleted):

“Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a big television, Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin can openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, you have spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life . . . But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you’ve got heroin?”

Recently the sequel, T2 *Trainspotting* has been released and Renton’s monologue has been updated:

“Choose life, Choose Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and hope that someone, somewhere cares. Choose looking up old flames, wishing you’d done it all differently. And choose watching history repeat itself.

Choose your future

Choose reality TV,

Choose a zero hour contract, a two hour journey to work

And choose the same for your kids, only worse, and smother the pain with an unknown dose of an unknown drug made in somebody’s kitchen

And then... take a deep breath

You’re an addict, so be addicted

Just be addicted to something else

Choose the ones you love

Choose your future

Choose life”

Compare these monologues to this passage from Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach) 15:15-20

*If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
 and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.*

*He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.
Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.*

This passage seems to enforce this same message as get from Renton's character in the films; that individuals have the ability to choose freely to go down the path of good or evil, and that it's their own fault if things go wrong. The passage describes the relationship between Wisdom and her devotees in personal terms; it sets out the importance of the commandments to help a community establish cohesion and that if individuals make deliberate choices that lead away from those commandments then the cohesion is upset.

We face an endless string of choices, which leads us to feel anxiety, guilt and pangs of inadequacy that we are perhaps making the wrong ones. But the Slovenian philosopher Renata Salecl questions the freedom of choice. She asks: *Could **individual** choices be distracting us from something bigger—our power as **social** thinkers?* A bold call for us to stop taking personal choice so seriously and focus on the choices we're making collectively. She says that the sweetness of having so many choices is making us more anxious, and we cease to be social critics but instead become self-critical. Our choices are linked to change and risk; when we make a choice we raise the possibility of something changing and that might be risky.

Our access to information and knowledge feels like it's never been so great; and yet some psychologists suggest that we no longer have a passion for knowledge but for ignorance. We know that things we choose may lead to trouble, may lead to addiction; but we would rather be ignorant and pretend not to know. Any questioning or doubt feels like it's troublesome and we see this in totalitarian leadership which has no room for doubt or questioning. A capitalist driven economy relies on the self-made person, the idea that there is no society only different individuals all of whom might make the best of their lives if they put their heart and soul and mind into it. So what happens when that fails? Usually an increased sense of guilt about having made the wrong choices.

That might be how a social and political ideology works but it isn't what we understand from our Judaeo-Christian culture, where there definitely is a society and there is a joining up of groups of people working collectively and not in isolation and separation from one another.

Paul picks up this point in his letters to the people of Corinth. He asks 'Do I make my decision based on ordinary human standards, which he often refers to as 'the flesh'. These standards, says Paul, are transient and flawed. But choices made in a spirit of discernment of God' will be made in a spirit of wisdom. In the passage we have in today's reading Paul comments on the divisiveness within the people at Corinth. He points out that the arguing about leadership is futile; that all leaders are servants and they should focus on God's spirit

not on the individual qualities of who might be a leader. Instead they should channel their interests in sorting out a common purpose and a common responsibility. All people belong to God and therefore, says Paul, ministry and the Christian life must be seen as a whole where all contributions are equally measured and no-one is lauded as being better for having made greater effort or made the right decisions.

This week one of the local schools visited the church and we had a morning together talking about what happens inside a church building: baptisms, weddings and funerals, reading stories from the Bible and sharing communion. Towards the end of the visit a little girl asked *how do we know all this is real?* It's real because all of those things do happen but I think she was a more philosophical question about the nature of our religion. All these things we read about in the Bible, these laws, for example; what if they aren't real anymore? What if they don't make sense anymore? She asked the very question that won't allow us to dwell in ignorance. We can't be complacent about our faith, resting on 2,000 years people doing things this way to prove that there must be something in it.

Our faith require both a commitment to the collective but also an individual response. That's what these readings today seem to be suggesting: we can and we do make an individual response to God's call. But it is **God's call**, so it's not just our choice. And if we response to follow the commandment to love God and to love one another, then we become part of the collective.

We all made the choice to be here today but the beginnings of that choice began some time ago, because we are part of a communion that has been meeting in this way in the past and continues to meet in this way today and will continue to meet in this way in the future. Our choice is not just about ourselves, it is a response to the God who calls us to be here, a God of all time and no time.