

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20
Psalm 119: 1-8
I Corinthians 3: 1-9
St. Matthew 5: 21-37

Epiphany 6 2023.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God.”
Deuteronomy 30: 19-20a

Sometimes it is easier to begin with what something *is not*, than to explain what it *is*... Here is an example from today: Many of us have heard of “human trafficking,” when people are controlled and exploited to work. An immigrant from a foreign country who is forced to work long hours for poor pay and living conditions on a farm, who doesn’t dare to complain for fear he or she will be fired and sent back to their former country (and they need the money from the work to support their family) – *that* is a form of human trafficking: People are being compelled or forced to work against their will, usually so an employer can make more money...

Another form of human trafficking is sex trafficking – typically a young girl (although sometimes a young boy) is wooed by someone who pretends to love them, and then forces them to have sex acts with strangers while the power figure profits financially... Human sex trafficking is not quite the same as prostitution, because the law assumes that a prostitute can choose whether or not to have sexual relations with a stranger, but a child, teen, or young adult who is a victim of human trafficking has *no choice* in the matter...

In one of the most magnificent passages in the New Testament, Paul writes in One Corinthians 13 that true love is chosen, generous, joyous and self-sacrificial. Love includes a *choice* by its very nature. The highest form of love, *agape*, is about God the Creator’s amazing, overwhelming love for his creatures. We can choose to *respond* to that love, shown supremely in the Lord Jesus, or we can choose to reject it, with all its sad consequences. The point is, we *choose* how to respond...

If a man or a woman is infatuated with another man or woman, and the partner ignores the suitor, the relationship will go nowhere. Romantic love, erotic love, includes a choice... Healthy sexual intimacy (which I believe is best expressed within marriage), ought to be a free self-offering to one’s partner.

Love of family, for all the foibles and warts we sometimes see in our family relations, is properly a free choice as well. How many of us know of family relationships which are strained or broken because a family member chooses not to participate well in the common bonds of kinship?... Lastly, there is the love of friends, neglected so badly in today’s world. In the Bible, David and Jonathan are a key example of deep, abiding friendship – two young men who had adventures in the army together, who grew up

together, and whose deep care for one another extended right to death... So we see that love, by its very nature, includes a free choice...

Let's also recall that the core of the nature of Almighty God himself is that God is love. The gift of Jesus Christ is God's astonishing self-offering, so that you and I can become adopted sons and daughters of God. I John 4: 8-9 reads:

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

Today's first reading is from Deuteronomy 30. Today's passage records Moses putting a choice before the people – to choose whether to follow the Living God, or not. To choose to serve the living God is the way of life and blessings. Equally, the people can choose to serve false gods; idols. That would be a foolish choice, but it is entirely up to them, to choose whom they will serve:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. (vv. 15-16)

In contrast, though:

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (vv. 17-18)

Of course, God wants the people to choose to be in full relationship with him:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (vv. 19-20)

This is a key theological fact for Christians – we all have free choice, including choosing whom we love. If we were puppets, we could never really *love*... We commonly call this having “free will...”

There is a painful fact, though, as a result of our having free will: We can freely make *right* choices. Very often, though, we often make wrong ones...

Our universal human tendency is to wander off course from the good plan which God has for us, with tragic consequences. Do we remember the story from the beginning of the Bible, when Eve and Adam were offered the fruit from the forbidden tree?... They could have refused – but they did not. And the poor choice they made broke their natural close connection with God. We are all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, you see. We all often make wrong choices as a result of this free capacity to love – and we suffer for it...

Many of us wonder why bad things happen in the world. It's true, there are some tragic consequences which arise from the laws of creation. This planet is made up of huge tectonic plates which rub against each other, with a heated core below. The outcome of this law of creation is that there was a terrible earthquake in Turkey and northern Syria this past week, and thousands of people – tragically – died; became injured; or became homeless...

We are gifted with the law of gravity, but that means that if we fall off a cliff, we shall surely die... We also acknowledge the reality of spiritual evil, which came “to steal, to kill and to destroy...” All of these are partial explanations of why there is suffering in this world.

Yet, there is another reason why bad things happen the world: People often make wrong choices, with devastating consequences. To go back to the example of the human trafficker, he or she is choosing to live in ways which are controlling, manipulative, and degrading...

Free choice and terrible consequences do not mean that God is unloving. Free will is actually part of the package of being able truly to love! Our job is to choose to live in a way which is beautiful for God – to make the best choices we can. May God give us his grace – his unmerited love and favour – so that the choices we make (the kind of lives we live) are faithful and beautiful; now and for ever.

Amen.