

Sunday 2 July 2006: Third Sunday after Trinity

Making choices

Readings: 2 Corinthians 8: 7-end; Mark 5:21-end

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Why have you chosen to come to St Martin's this morning? What prompted that choice – personal preference, a sense of duty, something you wanted to do, something you felt you had a responsibility to others to do? Some of you have chosen to be here to celebrate Orianna's baptism, to support her and her family on this day of great importance in Orianna's life. Perhaps some of you happened to be passing by, but even then you chose to stay rather than to carry on? Some of us might say we didn't have any choice in the matter – we just found our name on the preaching rota – but that would give a lie to the multitude of conscious and subconscious, self-interested and occasionally more altruistic decisions that I've made that led to the possibility of my name being on that rota in the first place.

Having the freedom to choose has become one of the touchstones of the consumerist society - freedom to choose in education and health care. It gets more complex when an individual's rights and freedom to choose impinge on what might be termed our common security – ask any Home Secretary, High Court judge or Home Office civil servant. But that doesn't stop the gospel of choice being preached by politicians of all persuasions.

I did wonder in reading the story of the woman with haemorrhages in today's gospel whether this could perhaps be held up as an example of consumer choice in healthcare. It seems at the outset at least, that the woman had some money and chose to spend that money in her search for something or someone to alleviate her condition. There's no indication that she'd been restricted in her choice to local physicians. Presumably she'd checked the most recently published league tables in the Galilee Times to see relative performances of these physicians, but sadly choice – and the ability to pay for choice – had brought no lasting improvement. Taking the gospel of choice to its logical conclusion, I guess she shouldn't really have been restricted to her choice of local messiah. Somewhere there should have been a league table giving the efficacy or otherwise of messianic cloaks in bringing about health benefits when subject to random human contact.

When thinking about freedom of choice, the real problem for that woman lay beyond her obvious physical symptoms – debilitating and embarrassing though they were. Her real problem was that her condition meant according to the law she was ritually unclean and therefore excluded from society. Her freedom to choose was limited by that exclusion. Those around her – religious professionals at the forefront – could make their choices with no sense of responsibility towards her or others excluded from society by the demands of religious purity or other factors. The healing that the woman longed for was not simply healing for the body – it was a restoration of her place in society, to be restored to the right relationships where choices are not just a matter of individual freedom but mutual responsibility.

Time and again in the healing miracles, Jesus makes plain through his words and actions, this dimension of social restoration. Often, he tells those he has healed to show themselves to the priests, to perform the rites that would enable them to be part of the community once again. Here he stops amidst the pressing crowds and encourages the woman to tell what has

happened to her – not to humiliate her but for her healing to be seen by the community, for them to be aware that she was once again part of that community of mutual responsibility.

The complex relationship between freedom of choice and mutual responsibility is to be seen not just in individual or local relationships, but in the relationships of which we are part as a global community. This week, Christian Aid is encouraging us to think again about the issue of trade justice. That's not just about the individual choices we make as consumers as to whether to purchase fairly traded products – important though those choices are. In an echo of the position of the woman in our Gospel reading, Trade Justice focuses on the capacity of institutional decisions to the ability of the marginalised and most vulnerable to make real choices. The dogma of unregulated free-trade for example says that such a system will liberate the market and allow consumers the best deal. The reality for the struggling farmers of Senegal is that they are unable to sell their onions, tomatoes or chickens because their markets are flooded by cheap imports from heavily subsidised European producers. Without a greater sense of mutual responsibility in the international institutions of world trade, freedom of choice is for the poorest, just an illusion.

Paul in the letter we heard earlier is trying to encourage a sense of mutual responsibility in the Christians of Corinth to their brothers and sisters in other churches in need of assistance. He begins with a little flattery about their excellence in all things, but his trump card is to point to a much different model of choice:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Reading that flattering preamble, I suspect that the Christians of Corinth found it as deeply counter-cultural as we do today to talk about freedom of choice in terms of self-giving rather than self-interest; in terms of mutual responsibility rather than individual preference. In Christ freely accepting the limits of our human flesh, we see an example of a choice which at first appears restrictive but actually opens to us a depth of freedom beyond our imagining.

Today Orianna in her baptism will also make profoundly counter-cultural choices – choices which are about self-giving rather than self-interest; we as the people of God will be called to make our promises too as an act of mutual responsibility to Orianna and to one another as members of Christ's body.

Today we sign Orianna with the sign of the cross – the ultimate sign of the costliness of Christ's freely chosen way of self-giving love. Individually and as a community, we will be reminded of the cross etched on heart and soul as a constant reminder of the freedom that is ours through that act of indescribable generosity.

The act of baptism, the going down into the water and the rising from it, will lead Orianna to the amazing reality and the amazing paradox that the way to real freedom is not through unlimited choice but through dying to self-interest and self-preservation in order to be raised to a transformed life in union with Christ.

And finally we give Orianna a candle, a symbol of the risen Christ, a symbol of the fullness of resurrection life, a symbol of the glorious liberty to which she and all of called as children of God.

*Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.*