Sermon for 6th of Easter Year C

Readings: Acts 16:9-15; Rev 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29.

i

On 10 April 2015 a 27- year old marketing executive, John Burgess, bent over to pick up his briefcase as his train pulled into Stockwell underground station in London. Precisely what happened is unclear, but somehow he misjudged picking up his case and on that crowded platform his head moved into the path of the train as he bent forward. He died three days later in hospital.

There are some religions and some Christians who would claim that Mr Burgess’ death was “God’s will.” I just can’t see it like that. I don’t like the suggestion that “God takes the good first”, either. The God I believe in weeps over the fate of Jerusalem that is choosing a military confrontation with Rome rather than following the Prince of Peace, but allows them the freedom to make their choice anyway.

Knowing what the outcome will be is not the same thing as wanting or arranging that outcome. Allowing people the freedom to make their mistakes, encounter trial and tribulation is not the same thing as God doing nothing about it. God has done something about it. He has picked up the broken pieces of our lives, and has put them back together again in Christ.

It seems contradictory to believe that God allows us true freedom and yet also has everything ultimately sorted out at the same time. It doesn’t seem to make sense that we exercise our own choices and yet can also fulfil God’s “plan” for our lives. No wonder rationalistic atheists laugh; and yet holding these two apparently irreconcilable truths has been the only way to make sense of our experience of God.

Our reading today from Revelation 21 apparently gives us a glimpse of the future that **will** be, not just a future that **could** be. It’s as if we have been allowed to read the last chapter of the book before we’ve read all the middle chapters. But whereas in a book we know the actions of the characters are determined to reach the circumstances of the final chapter by the author, we feel that we are free to write our own story.

How can God reveal the last chapter when we have yet to make our free choices? It must mean that God knows the architecture of the New Jerusalem, but whether God already knows whether my name will be in the Book of Life or not, or whether even God has to wait upon my choices in life to know, is beyond me to fathom. That there will be saints in heaven is already established. Whether I will be one of them I suspect has yet to be decided.

Part of the mystery of time and eternity is answered in our Gospel reading from John 14:23-29. The indwelling Spirit who will come down and make his dwelling in the hearts of believers is like a foreshadowing of the last chapter when the New Jerusalem shall come down from heaven. God’s Spirit is with our spirit helping us find our way.

Paul is about to have one of those moments in his life when his free choice to go east, is somehow prevented by the Holy Spirit, and he is then sent west to Macedonia. Yet I suppose he could still have had another go at travelling east, if he had wished.

But travelling west seemed to be the Lord’s plan for him. Going west produced the most fruitful years of his ministry. Paul sums this experience of providence, of God’s guiding hand, in his letter to the Romans 8:28:

*We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him.*

How many times in your life have you made a choice and in retrospect felt that it was “meant to be”? How many times have you said God guided you along a particular path? How often does failure later play a role in success?

Let’s look at how this worked out in Paul’s decision to go to Philippi.

ii

According to Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles*, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch after their initial travels and are challenged there by those from Jerusalem who think gentile believers should be circumcised and subject to the Jewish food laws.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A bitter argument ensues (Acts 15:1-2) which they take to Jerusalem where Peter and James can help resolve the dispute. Peter won the day for Paul’s position by recounting his baptism of the gentile, Cornelius (Acts 15:7-11). James comes up with a compromise solution of allowing entry to the Church by baptism alone, but also enforcing the food laws (Acts 15:19-21).[[2]](#footnote-2)

It seems that even this compromise was unacceptable to Paul and perhaps that is the background to today’s story.

Paul and his companions seem to be wandering rather aimlessly at the beginning of Acts16. Paul wants to go further east, but cannot, tries another route and that is also blocked (Acts 16:6-8). It has been suggested by some scholars that Paul was seeking a location with a lower density of Jews where he would be free to forget James’ compromise with the food laws.

In Philippi the Jewish community seems to have been banished to the outskirts of the city as if it were a foreign cult not permitted inside the city. Yet there is curiously no synagogue by the river where Paul meets Lydia. Perhaps the Jewish community is too small to have a synagogue within the city, but it is also curious there is no mention of any men present at this place of worship.

Is it significant that Lydia is a proselyte believer (Acts 16:14)?

Perhaps Paul **chose** to seek out proselyte Jewish believers because he still needed a foundation of Jewish faith and understanding on which to build the Church, but perhaps not an ethnically Jewish community which might be more hidebound and loyal to the laws about circumcision and kosher food.

When Paul attempted to build the Gospel upon pagan foundations in Athens in the following chapter (Acts 17), it was a miserable failure. At this time he still required a foundation of Jewish beliefs for the Gospel to grow.

Thus we can say that Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit to a **more fruitful field** than Antioch and the environs of Palestine, to somewhere even more fruitful than the province of Asia which he has initially thought to try.

Is this not an example of human free will and divine direction coming together for the good of the Gospel?

Wesley had a similar experience to Paul in that he too was led to a more fruitful field.

When Wesley was rescued as a young boy from the fire sweeping through Epworth rectory, his mother Sarah, felt that he had been spared for some great purpose. John Wesley described his escape from the fire as being “a brand plucked from the burning.” He too had that strange perception that somehow he had a destiny, a plan to fulfil.

In an attempt to fulfil that destiny, Wesley went to Georgia to try and evangelise the Native Americans – yet that episode proved as fruitless as Paul’s efforts to go east.

Wesley saw no vision, but did have his own inner religious experience which strangely warmed his heart and fitted him for the ministry that was to come.

The fruitful field Wesley found was not Georgia, that was for another to sow and reap; nor was it the familiar settings of Oxford university or the settled parish ministry of Wroote where he had served his curacy. His fruitful field was geographically near, but as far away as Georgia in another sense to those places he had known – for Wesley found his fruitful field in open-air preaching as an itinerant evangelist.

If this is how Christ has led Paul and Wesley and countless others between the two and since, how can we doubt that He will not lead us also to fruitful fields?

It is therefore permitted to stop something we have been doing because it is no longer producing results. Failure is a sign post, not the end of the road.

iii

One thing we may be sure of is this: God is full of surprises. Fruitful fields are often not where we might at first assume them to be.

Who would have thought that the further Paul got from the Jewish homeland, the stronger would be the effect of his preaching?

Who would have thought an Oxford academic would reap such a harvest among miners, servants and shopkeepers?

Luke is believed by most to have been a gentile who was a physician by profession. He was born in Antioch and could have been aware of Paul’s dispute with the Jerusalem party, and Luke was resident in Troas, or at least temporarily present in Troas, when Paul arrived there after his abortive attempt to go east. Had Luke followed Paul’s party from Antioch in the hope of meeting up with them?

This possibility has led some scholars to suggest that the Macedonian pleading with Paul in his vision might have been Luke. Had Luke first suggested this alternative course of action to Paul for it to be confirmed in Paul’s visionary experience?

When Paul was attempting to go east Luke speaks of “them” and by the time they all decide to go west to Greece, Luke refers to “we” (v10) and it remains “we” until Paul leaves Philippi. Luke is again at Paul’s side later on in Rome.

Let us suppose for a moment that Luke did play this pivotal role of pointing Paul towards the west. It is often the case that God uses people around us to be his messengers and signposts along the way.

Divine confirmation may often follow in ways that are less dramatic than Paul’s vision, or Wesley’s warmed heart; it may be through a myriad of small things that add up to confirm to our spirit that we have been led by the Lord himself to the place where we are meant to be. Somehow, God affirms the way we have freely chosen.

It was Peter Boehler the Moravian preacher Wesley met in London that pointed Wesley in the right direction by advising him to “preach faith until you have it” in those dark days of doubt and turmoil after Wesley returned from his unhappy trip to Georgia.

It was George Whitefield who later persuaded Wesley to engage in field preaching, much to Wesley’s initial discomfort.

We all have times when we wander around rather aimlessly, not sure of what the next step should be, unclear which path the Lord wishes us to take. We know we have the freedom to choose for ourselves, but as we have noted, it **feels** as if there is a **right** path which we are **supposed** to take.

We can’t ever prove such a fanciful notion – only history tells us when we have chosen wisely. Yet there seems to be a purpose behind the apparently random acts of free will. A sense of divine guidance has always been part of Christian experience; it’s claimed by many still today and we cannot shake it off.

The world always stands unsure of the way ahead, because we cannot foresee the future ramifications of today’s choices. Sometimes the choices we face fill us with fear and dread. What if we choose the wrong path? Could we choose so badly that we damage the whole future of the Church?

Our Bible passages today counsel peace. Despite our freedom to choose and our freedom therefore to get it wrong, the final chapter has already been written and we have had a sneak preview.

Despite our sense of confusion and fear of the unknown, we know that in the end, we collectively get it right – by God’s grace. We must get it right between us – because we’ve had a glimpse of the last chapter – even if we don’t see precisely the route we will take to get there.

The author Robert Brault once said:

*Sometimes, perhaps, we are allowed to get lost that we may find the right person to ask directions of.*

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**May 2015**

1. See Sermon for 5th of Easter Year C [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)