

Sixth Sunday of Easter 2021

My reading this week seems to have been dominated by Victorian priests and poets. The first is John Keble whose great hymn, 'Blest are the pure in heart' we sang at the Gradual. This was a favourite of my father whose years mind falls tomorrow. I was taken by the last line in the first verse: '...their soul is Christ's abode.' The second Victorian is St John Henry Newman who in 1848, just one year after his ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood wrote, 'We can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe.' This statement about choice seems to fly in the face of the words of Jesus this morning: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.' And this begs a series of questions: have you chosen to be here this morning? Did your parents make you? Have you made the decision to follow in the way... or has it been made for you? Paradoxically and in true theological style the answer of course is yes... and no!

We can only really engage with this statement of Jesus by looking at the context in which he said it. Last weekend we celebrated our Patronal Festival with all due solemnity, which was wonderful. The problem is when we do such a thing we step aside from the normal round of readings, from the lectionary. We missed an important part of John's gospel last week, which informs our reading today. Last week Jesus said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.' This is the last of the great 'I am' sayings of John's gospel and there is in it a whiff of things to come. Ascension and Pentecost are round the corner, this 'I am' of Jesus now involves us, this is important...us.

Us...now I know that I often speak in this vein, but I believe that it is important, in fact I believe it is the essence of Christian faith. The matter of choice is not a straightforward issue like choosing what to wear, or eat or even who to vote for. These are personal matters about preference. When Jesus says 'I am the vine you are the branches' he is making a statement not about preference but about reality, the reality of living together. You did not choose me; the reality of life is that we live together and the only way is love. Love is not a choice like those that we make every day. Love is matter of life and death. When Jesus says 'You did not choose me...I chose you' we should not immediately think about ourselves and wonder about the questions of free will, or wonder whether I have been chosen and not 'old mate' over there! But we should hear Jesus speaking to all of us, to a people. This is part of Jesus' great farewell speech and he is channeling Moses, who did the same in Deuteronomy: 'Choose life' said Moses 'so that you and your descendants may live.'

When you look at the first letter of John a part of which we heard this morning, you realise that it's not really a letter at all! The other two are, they begin Dear Madam. The first letter doesn't because it's really a

sermon. It is written to help this community come together, to live and that is why we have in the letter and the gospel the command to love. It is not a choice, Jesus doesn't say I'd prefer that you love one another, it is a command. It is not a choice, because it is the only way.

So let's not think that Jesus is speaking to us as individuals: I chose you as a people to reveal to the world the way to live, for you and those who are coming after you, is perhaps a good paraphrase. The choices that we make reflect the people that we are. When we truly discover who we are we realise we have not chosen, there is no choice. With self-understanding comes a sense of unity of being a member of something, the Body of Christ, a branch of the one vine.

It is dawning on us, albeit slowly, that many of the issues that we face in our world are not matters in which we choose whether or not to act. As a community appointed by Christ to go and bear fruit we need to, we must demonstrate that love for each other, for the vulnerable, for those different from us, for our environment, it is not a matter of choice but a matter of life and death. When Newman wrote to Mrs Froud and said 'We can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe.' It was not written in threatening terms but as a reminder that there are ramifications for our choices. To choose against love, is to choose against our very selves, against life itself. It is not an option, we are not offered a choice.

The third Victorian is poet and priest Gerard Manly Hopkins. He is a tough read at the best of times. He was man who wrestled with faith and life. In his Sonnet 'Carrion Comfort' he wrestles with his despair, frantic to flee from God. Yet there is more, I can, he writes, *I can not choose not to be*. We are living at a time when choosing not to be, is seen as a valid alternative, a choice among others. The matter of euthanasia is keenly debated, the problem of suicide is gaining more and more prominence and we must ask why.

Our first response must be to know that we are one in each other's joys and despair. We are one in each other's pleasure and pain. Our lives are inexorably linked. We all express preferences for many different things. But ultimately we recall that we are chosen to love, because we are one. Last Sunday Fr Scott reminded us of the difficult passage from John chapter fourteen when Jesus says: 'If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.' Jesus reiterates this again today. Our prayers are made in Jesus name, this is Christian prayer and it is not answered in ways that we always perceive because they are the prayers of Jesus, they are the prayers of a people. So our second response is always in our lives of prayer, it is here that our love begins as we allow the spirit of Christ within us to pray. And it is from there we express our Christian ethic, which is simply to love. Amen.