

Thought for the day 24th July 2020 from Toby Parsons (All Hallows)

Do we have a choice?

1 Samuel 9.1-14 and **Luke 22.1-13**

“He scorned their offer and shouted ‘You should listen to him, not condemn him!’”

Or “He was overcome with remorse and ran from that place without saying another word!”.

Or even “That’s not enough money - find someone else to do your dirty work!”.

Imagine if that was how verse 6 in today’s passage from Luke 22 continued. Judas had just discussed with the chief priests how they might arrest Jesus. And we know what happened next - Judas accepted the money; and on the night that Jesus broke bread with his friends, he betrayed him.

What would have happened if Judas hadn’t agreed to the betrayal? If he had responded in one of the ways above?

Our Old Testament reading also talks of someone walking towards something big. Saul’s obedience and perseverance led to Samuel anointing him king of Israel.

But what if Saul hadn’t humbly listened to his servant in verse 10? Or if they hadn’t spoken to the woman in verse 11 and been told to hurry?

So many things in the bible - as in any part of history - could have been radically different, if just one or two small decisions had been taken differently. So if we believe in divine purpose, in God’s ultimate vision for humankind, do we give up any sense that our choices really matter?

There’s a lot of literature about free will, determinism and similar concepts. I suspect few of us find all of the competing theories easy to understand!

But there’s a very simple point that we should keep in mind - that God loves us! We hear that time and time again, and if it wasn’t so amazing it might become boring. Perhaps sometimes we do say the words without really taking it in afresh. But God loves us. And has good intentions for us. So if any of our actions are pre-set by God, partially or fully, then that’s not something that should trouble us.

And, like many things, it’s not a binary issue.

God blesses us with opportunities and talents, and wants us to make good use of them. We then make our own decisions, sometimes wise and sometimes less so. God smiles/sighs/weeps, and

gently nudges us again in the right direction - through what we see around us, what we hear from others, or what we feel in our hearts. We then make our own decisions... and so it goes on.

At times, God's nudges are subtle. On occasions, more insistent. The same Samuel who anointed Saul had to hear the message of his own calling three times before, with Eli's help, he responded.

God has good purposes for all of us - although that's very different from saying that all that happens will be good. And some parts of our journey may be more clearly mapped in advance.

Our challenge is to navigate that journey with eyes, ears and a heart open to God, making our choices in a way that both acknowledges and reflects God's love for us.