

Now may I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I know that there are some people here who have taken up Mother Rebecca's suggestion of summer reading and reading Edith Eger's excellent book called *The Choice*. Those people might have been sensitized to the theme that's running through those readings we just heard about choice and choosing. It's there in every one of the readings. In the gospel, Jesus invites his hearers to make a choice after many of his followers have deserted him. Jesus says to the disciples, "Do you also wish to go away? You don't have to keep following me," he's saying. "You're free to leave. Make a choice. Don't feel obliged." In our epistle from Ephesians, Saint Paul writes powerfully about the need to stand firm. He's calling his readers to be very clear about what they stand for and what they stand against. Saint Paul is never one for ambivalence. He'd encourage his readers to come to a decision and stick with it. Don't follow Jesus half-heartedly is his constant call.

But it's in the Old Testament reading from Joshua that the subject of choice is presented most startlingly, so that's the reading that I want to focus on. The story comes at the end of the story of Joshua when Joshua's an old man, and he's gathered the people together that he's been leading for a sort of farewell sermon and address. The part we're looking at is towards the end of that sermon. He's reaching a climax. He lays out for the people of Israel a number of options. He says, "You can serve the god of your ancestors, or you can serve the god of the Amorites, or you can serve the Lord God who brought you up out of Egypt." As his sermon comes to a climax, he says this, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

To modern ears, such a challenge can make us feel a bit uncomfortable. When Joshua puts it like that, he's getting a bit close to making a judgment, and none of us are comfortable doing that. If we choose one thing, are we excluding something else? We like to think that there are two sides to every argument. Who am I to say that one side is better than the other? Both sides, surely, can be equally valid. There are two sides to a bit of flypaper, and it matters a lot to the fly which side he lands on. Choices matter. We all need to make choices. We may think that life just happens to us, that we're never really in a position to make a choice, that everything happens by default or fate, but that's not the case.

There's a brilliant book, I'm sure many people here have read by Viktor Frankl called *Man's Search For Meaning*. Frankl was a Holocaust survivor, and he had a great insight in the concentration camp. When he [inaudible] it, him and all the people that were with him were stripped of everything or nearly everything. They couldn't actually be stripped of absolutely everything as their captors intended them to be, because what couldn't be taken from them was the response that they were making to the situation that they were in. Frankl realized he couldn't be stripped of the power to choose. He writes this. "Everything can be taken from a man or a woman, but one thing, the last of the human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances to choose one's own way. We always have the power of choice. In fact, we're defined by the choices that we make."

As Professor Dumbledore said to Harry Potter at the end of the Chamber of Secrets, "It's our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities," or as Sartre are said, "We are our choices." We need to make choices, but I've noticed that many of the choices that I and all of us are called to make are small choices. As many of you know, the work in the Rectory has recently been completed, and we're looking forward to welcoming everybody to have a look around at one of the parties, but it's happened only as a result of many, many, many trips to Home Depot. For months, every day off has been spent looking at tiles, lights, faucets, sinks. Laura has dragged me to places that I never knew existed. She said, "What do you think? Should we go with this or that? What do you think of this color?" They all look white to me, different shades.

There was one particular day. I knew I was getting pretty close to my limit. With hindsight, I shouldn't have gone to Home Depot this day. I should have stayed at home, but anyway, sadly, I completely lost it. My fuse blew. I took the last straw, and it was when Laura turned to me in one of the aisles and said, "Which toilet roll holder do you prefer?" I passed the point of caring. I'd made just too many choices, but they were all choices about trivial, frivolous things. Well, Laura wouldn't think so, but it made me think, "When did I last make a conscious decision about a really big important choice?" Too often, I drift along, letting life happen to me rather than giving shape to my life by making a bold choice. I think that's why Joshua couches his question as he does. "Choose this day whom you will

serve." Big questions of faith are always important. They're in that box marked important but not urgent. There are no deadlines.

There are young people going off to college in the next few weeks. They might have identified many colleges that they wanted to go to. They all whittled it down to perhaps three or four, but there will have come a day when they had to say, "This is the college I'm going to." They would have had to say no to the others, and they would have done that because there's a deadline. They would have been forced to make a decision. We don't have such a deadline with God. Of course, it's vitally important to decide how we're going to follow Jesus Christ. Important but rarely urgent.

C.S. Lewis wrote this in *The Screwtape Letters*: Satan and his imps were planning their strategy for attacking the world that's hearing the message of salvation. One of the demons says, "I've got the plan, master. When I get to earth and take charge of people's thinking, I'll tell them there's no heaven." The devil responds, "Ah, they'll never believe that. This book of truth is full of messages about the hope of heaven through sins forgiven. They won't believe that. They know there's a glory to come." On the other side of the room, another says, "I've got a plan. I'll tell them there's no hell." "No good," he says. "Jesus, while he was on earth, talked more of hell than heaven. They know in their hearts that their wrong will have to be taken care of in some way." One brilliant little imp in the back stood up and said, "Then I know the answer. I'll just tell them there's no hurry." That was the one Satan chose.

That's why Joshua said to his people, "Choose this day. If not now, when? You've put it off long enough," he says. "Don't wait any longer. Make this choice that's important and urgent." I'll pick up one final aspect of Joshua's challenge. That's that he says, "Choose this day whom you will serve." He doesn't say, "Choose this day which God you're going to believe in," but which God you will serve. Our faith has to be worked out in practice. It's not a simple intellectual ascent to various credal statements. There's no such thing as Christian faith that isn't worked out in service and action. The place that this is expressed most strongly in the bible is the book of James where we read this.

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one

of you says to them, 'Go in peace. Keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" Faith, by itself, if it has no works is dead.

Episcopalians understand this. Our tradition has always acknowledged the need for service and action. We're mindful of the fact that there are many people in our community, in our city who don't have the range of choices that we have. Money can't bring you happiness, but it does bring options. We want to serve those whose options and whose choices are limited.

We have an outreach committee that's gaining more and more momentum. They coordinate a variety of opportunities and partnerships in which we and the church here can get involved. Just this week, a group from Saint James served about 80 to 85 people from the homeless community in Ocean Beach. There are things like that we can get involved in, outreach things, and there are in-reach things. In the middle of September, we're having Rally Sunday, and all the stalls outside will be there for all the works of the church, all the committees to make the church happen. They'll all be saying, "Come join us. Help us." There are lots of opportunities to serve both within our parish community and outside. We could all find a place to serve. May we hear Joshua's challenge coming down to us through the centuries. "Choose this day whom you will serve." Amen.