

'I chose you'

a sermon preached on the

6th Sunday of Easter

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lecture: Acts 10:44-48, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

Judeo-Christian religion is incomprehensible without the concept of 'election', or 'chosen-ness'. The Hebrew root word occurs 164 times in the Hebrew Scriptures! Everything hangs on the idea that at first an individual, and then, through that individual's faithfulness, an entire group of people were chosen, elect. 'God's chosen people', as we say to describe the Jews. Abraham responds to being chosen, and through faithfulness to the covenant sealed in circumcision his descendents will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. ¹ Jacob responds to God's choosing, returning to his native land to make peace with the brother from whom he stole birthright, and having wrestled with God's angel all night by the river Jabbok he is renamed: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ² Moses responds to being chosen by God, and through his faithfulness he leads the children of Israel out of slavery, through 40 years of wilderness to the edge of the promised land. And to survey this theme of chosen-ness fully it would be necessary to talk about Noah and Joshua and Samuel and Saul and David and so many others. And this idea of being chosen, hand-picked by God, elect, set apart and different is the galvanising idea for otherwise-disparate and warring tribal groups.

It is an incredibly powerful idea. Even when all the external circumstances seemed to indicate utter rejection of their status as God's chosen, languishing by the streams of Babylon wondering how they could possibly sing the Lord's song, even then, in the most desperate of circumstances, the children of Israel could anticipate God's Messiah who would lead them once more as the chosen. Armed with the belief that God has specially selected me and my tribe, in preference to you and your tribe and the rest of the tribes, my energies and loyalties can be harnessed – God willing, for good! The idea of being chosen, elect, is that powerful an energy. So when we hear John's Jesus tell disciples: "You did not choose me but I chose you," ³ we know that his first hearers understood well that this was consistent with the long-standing promise that God chooses. As God's elect they belonged, they knew they were special, they would expect the reward of discipleship.

Jesus' various teachings on servanthood suggests that he was well aware of the negative potential which accompanied being chosen - surveying the substantial body of textual material across all four gospels, it's clear that Jesus was well aware of the dark side of being chosen. He had, after all, wrestled with this very potential within himself, for '40 days' in the wilderness. For chosen-ness readily breeds a culture of self-righteousness, superiority, condescension, legalism and judgementalism. Just a cursory glance at the history of the church readily reveals all this, in embarrassing and tragic technicolour. When I believe that God has called me, set me apart, elected me, I am inclined to believe that this means that God has rejected others who do not match up in some way. This belief can also be a force for tremendous good, and the same glance at the history of the church reveals this too – firmly believing in their being elect, Christians have accomplished tremendous acts of bravery, compassion, inventiveness and justice down the centuries.

So it would seem that being God's elect is something of a double-edged sword. The subjective experience of *feeling chosen* is a powerful motivator for good. This same subjective experience of feeling chosen is simultaneously the dark side of religion. Without a sense of feeling special, which is an aspect of being chosen, would any of us actually get up in the morning and battle our way through the day I wonder. There is certainly no Christian faith without this motivating and galvanising principle, that by baptism we are chosen:

¹ Genesis 15:5, 22:17, 26:4

² Genesis 32:28

³ John 15:16

“You are a chosen race,” Peter writes, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”⁴ That is the accomplishment and the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery we are celebrating during these 50 days.

So how do we live into our election, our being God’s chosen, without self-righteousness and condescension, and possibly even violence, towards others? For one thing, our being chosen cannot mean that others are not also chosen, for that could only be so if God was hell-bent on dividing the world’s peoples: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” we heard in last Sunday’s gospel, “and I must bring them also.”⁵ “The circumcised believers were astounded,” Acts records of Peter’s visit to Cornelius’ house, “that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.”⁶

But perhaps the hardest thing to come to terms with is the difference between the ‘idea’ of being chosen, and the reality of what it means to be have been chosen. As an idea, being elect, chosen, feels good, special. Israel liked the idea of its being ‘chosen’ – but Israel, with a sense of pride for keeping the covenant, was tempted to imagine that it did the choosing, and its agenda became tribal, xenophobic, oppressive, self-centred. Israel was chosen, yes, but the choosing was for the purpose of being a blessing for all the nations.⁷ The One who does the choosing has an agenda which is global, hospitable, liberating, self-emptying.

The threat to the Paschal Mystery is this - when I feel chosen it is accompanied by the feeling that I have done something especially worthy. I may even begin to imagine that my choice is the important thing. Paradoxically, even to say ‘I turn to Christ’ puts us at risk of ego inflation, for it is to claim too much. God does the choosing – “you did not choose me...” – so the person is no longer in control of the agenda. Election means that Another is now in the driving seat. So I can claim no credit, not even for ‘my decision’ to turn to Christ! “You did not choose me...”

Jesus’ disciples, those baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ, are chosen, elect, set apart, but no longer running the show. Another is in the driving seat whose agenda Jesus describes as bearing fruit, fruit that will last.⁸

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4 1 Peter 2:9a

5 John 10:16a

6 Acts 10:45

7 Genesis 12:2

8 John 15:16