

ON MAKING CHOICES¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh
AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth
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What do you make of today's Old Testament reading? Who could approve of picking a woman at random and leading her away with a ring through her nose to marry someone she had never met and who lived in some other country? And she agreed!

So, what is this reading all about? Abraham is now very old. Sarah has died and Abraham's family has reached crisis point. Isaac, their only son after the departure of Hagar and Ishmael, was unmarried. The family was facing extinction. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or grains of sand on a beach. If God's promise was to be fulfilled, Abraham had to ensure the continuation of the line and thus find a woman to marry Isaac. This story is about how that result was achieved. Abraham charged his steward, the chief retainer of his household and the most senior and trusted representative he had, to travel back to Abraham's ancestral homeland to find a wife. The steward located Rebecca by the well and asks her family about marriage with Isaac. The family in turn ask Rebecca and she agrees. Rebecca then makes the return journey with the steward and meets Isaac in the field where he is alone and meditating. Actually, this conclusion to the story is quite evocative, as is the section where the steward finds Rebecca.

What will we make of this? We could note many things about ancient marriage customs, but I want to draw your attention to the parallels between this story and the narrative about the Annunciation. Here again a woman is confronted by a messenger with a somewhat challenging proposal. The woman agrees. Then follow significant consequences both for her and, as it happens, for us. Both these stories are about discovery, challenge and response.

¹ Readings: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17; Romans 7:14-25; Matthew 11:15-19, 25-30

They contrast with the opening verses of this morning's gospel. The images are no less striking. We are given a mini-parable of some children playing in the market place and calling out to other children who happen to be there. Some commentators suggest that the two groups are boys and girls; the boys are playing at a wedding where all the men danced together. The girls are playing at a funeral where women have the most significant role. Each group complains that the other will not join them. The boys offer a joyful game of dancing. The girls offer a different kind of activity, more solemn and serious. It is as if they first offer the excitement of touch football and then the sobriety of chess. Either way, there are no takers.

Jesus goes on to link these images with the response of his hearers, first to John the Baptist and then to him. Like the children, people always reject, but for different grounds. John, on the one hand, is too severe. Jesus, on the other, is too lax. It seems that nothing will satisfy these hearers. Actually, that is wrong. These hearers have already resolved not to accept and thus find the excuses. They have no integrity.

This theme appears again in the reading from Romans. Here Paul reflects on the inner conflicts that we all face. We are at sixes and sevens. We know what we ought to do but cannot do it. This is not just a facile moral point in which Paul flagellates himself in order to make us feel guilty. We might fall into this interpretative trap if we allow ourselves to think that the things of the flesh to which Paul refers are all, in one sense or another, particularly evil or sinful, most probably sexual. Actually, Paul is referring to the ordinary activities of our lives. This is not so much an opposition between evil and goodness but an orientation to how we manage our lives, to our priorities, to our fundamental viewpoint. The point is that what we want to do comes to us not primarily by our own wishes but through our culture.

Thus, if we start with Rebecca, we start not with a person who made the right choice, but with a person who was prepared to choose, as was Mary. If we move to Jesus' hearers, we move to persons who are unwilling to respond to anything. And Paul then encapsulates this contrast by locating it within ourselves. And we might actually see ourselves not as either Rebecca or the hearers, as either the committed

or the uncommitted, but as all of them at the same time, continually struggling with the ongoing pressures of modern day living. This kind of ambivalence and ambiguity is a part of everyone's life.

We must not imagine that Rebecca was entirely free to choose as she wanted. It might have been possible for her to say no to Abraham's steward but we deceive ourselves if we think that she could have chosen someone else. Her cultural role was to respond to what was offered to her.

During the lockdown, I have been watching the Amazon Prime miniseries, *Little Fires Everywhere*.² In one scene, Elena, a middle-class white woman with an apparently perfect life, played by Reese Witherspoon, accuses Mia, a struggling African-American artist, played by Kerry Washington, of making bad choices in contrast to the good ones that she and her white friends have made. Mia responds by shouting that Elena had good choices to make, implying that she did not. Mia was quite correct in pointing out that different situations provide different choices.

All of us are in the same situation; we can choose only those things that are on offer. It does not follow that those with fewer choices make better choices. As *Little Fires Everywhere* proceeds, we discover that all the characters have made bad choices, even when it might originally appear that their choices had been good.

Recent events, both local and international, have shown us the complexities involved in the making of choices. We can never assume that we are to choose simply between good and evil. Some of our choices will involve valuing one good more highly than another. All around the world people have been choosing whether to demonstrate in a cause that they value highly or whether to isolate during a pandemic. We may disagree with the choices that other people make but we cannot deny the critical nature of choices in general. None of us has been personally responsible for either the pandemic or the history of race relations, but we are responsible for our contemporary choices.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Fires_Everywhere_\(miniseries\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Fires_Everywhere_(miniseries))

A recent post on a Facebook page that I follow drew my attention, in a dramatic way, to a point that I have made quite frequently in my sermons. That is, that we must choose with whom we identify when we read biblical stories and parables. The post, directed principally to conservative white Christians in the United States, said:

... white Christianity suffers from a bad case of Disney Princess theology. As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt. They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, but never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisees. ... people ... [may] have no lens for locating themselves rightly in Scripture or society ...³

In a specific reference to the USA, but one that has clear resonance here, the author, Erna Kim Hackett, goes on to say:

For citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when studying Scripture is a perfect example of Disney princess theology.

We could ask ourselves whether we would liken the European occupation of Australia to an arrival in a promised land or to the Babylonian invasion of Israel and the capture of its inhabitants. Of course, such either-or comparisons fail to do justice to complex situations, but fundamental assumptions always form the thoughts and actions that follow them.

Paul's words ring true. Indeed, if we take him seriously, we will know that even our best choices carry our common human frailty with them. I do not frequently discuss the concept of original sin, but it refers to our tendency falsely to regard ourselves as the centre of the universe. It is this tendency that is the corrupting factor in our best intentions.

³ I wish to thank Melbourne Anglican, Susan Southall, for posting the reference on Facebook.
https://www.inheritancemag.com/stories/why-i-stopped-talking-about-racial-reconciliation-and-started-talking-about-white-supremacy?fbclid=IwAR23kNhUrc3_mC3kYZpa6KUW7DpcNFvmLEIA7tJhBuU1AX6ojtIC15sKKbU

We seem to have arrived at quite a sombre point in this sermon, so you may be wondering where I am going to go next. Our reading from Romans this morning ends chapter seven of Paul's letter. Over the next few weeks, we will read through chapter 8, which begins with the encouraging statement that there is "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus", and ends by proclaiming:

... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁴

For Bishop Tom Wright, this chapter is the central pivot for all of Paul's teaching. He says,

And since it is love's nature to bind the beloved to itself, Paul is convinced and after eight chapters of Romans he might expect that we would be as well, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God⁵

That should be our faith and our experience; neither denying our sins nor seeking to escape the consequences of our choices, but, in all things, relying on God's love.

A poem by Kevin Hart:

What is it like, Lord? How does it feel
to see me
performing on the thinnest of tightropes,

this delicate world,
and have to catch me each time I fall?
What is it like

not to forget my smallest lie?
To see my past
always before you, those days

⁴ Romans 8:38-39

⁵ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 1: Chapters 1-8*, London, SPCK, 2004, p. 161

like food left out to rot? Tell me,
isn't it hard
to have made the world, and then be told

exactly where it is wrong?
To be the key
to open anything at all, and only be used

for locking other people out?
What is it like?
How does it feel to be my God?⁶



Rebecca at the Well
Benedetto Luti (1666-1724)

⁶ Kevin Hart, *Two Poems #2, Your Shadow (Poems 1980-83)*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, pp. 33-34