

letter to the Romans. In the first place- like the rest of us- he had problems with his own character. *"I want to do good but I keep opting to do bad."* Tell me about it.... In the second place, there were heavy social pressures on him and upon his fellow Christians living in Rome. It was not a pure, just society, nor a safe, kindly environment in which to live. Greed, materialism, promiscuity, corruption, knife crime, racial tensions, family breakdown would have filled their television channels had they had television channels to fill. It was not easy, said Paul, either to know which the right choices were or to pursue them when you had decided.

So how can you say in this day and age that Sean, who has grown up with a violent father, in a violent community, has no job and is at risk from the boys of a vicious gang has the same freedom to choose whether or not to carry a knife as Simon who lives in a nice area, with loving parents and is looking forward to a happy life? Or how can you say that Julia, who is successful, financially secure, and of strong character has the same freedom to protest about corruption in her workplace as Sandra, who is a single-parent, struggling to survive and lacking in confidence? And how could Jesus expect the same freedom to choose to follow him from Jennifer, who grew up in a Christian home, with every encouragement and teaching to opt for the Christian faith as from Jake, who has grown up with no religion at all and whose friends would think him crazy if he went near a church or from Rasheed who has grown up a Muslim and who will be ostracised if he becomes a Christian? We are not totally free in making our choices.

In some ways it is merciful that life is not generally like those fairy stories where one, single false decision can send you to death and destruction. Some of our choices do have a profound, long-lasting effect on our lives but they are very seldom the end of our story for good or for bad. A teenager can make what look like all the right choices about A levels for a sound career only to find that recession or personality clashes or changes in his own priorities take him into a different path. Or he might make all the wrong choices at sixteen and his parents despair that he will be forever in a dead-end job, but in later life change direction, re-train and become successful. Happy marriages sadly, do not always remain happy for all kinds of reasons. Unhappy marriages sometimes improve and, if they do not, they can be dissolved and a second chance found.

Even Jesus admitted that the choice whether or not to follow him is not permanent. Remember his little story of the two brothers whose father asked them to work in his vineyard? The one said, *"Yes, I will do it."* The other said, *"No, I do not want to."* Later on, the one who said yes remembered a prior engagement and abandoned the job. The one who said no changed his mind and helped his father. For real life examples, you only to have to think of Judas Iscariot who said *"yes"* and became one of Jesus' closest disciples, only to fall away and betray him to death and Paul who said *"absolutely no way do I want anything to do with Jesus,"* only to become one of his greatest apostles. Things change. Nothing is cut and dried.
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One of the best things I think my mother ever said was to an elderly lady in her church who had been brought up to believe that a one-off choice for or against Jesus would determine permanently whether you went to heaven or hell. This lady was grieving for her daughter who had died very suddenly of a brain haemorrhage. She was also terrified because her daughter had opted out of the Christian faith as an adult.

It is not quite accurate to say that nothing can separate us from the love of God and from the power of God for good. Because there is just one thing and that is our own deliberate choice. We are free human beings and not even God can compel us to accept his love.

It is a choice we have to make and choosing to accept the love of God is not just a one-off decision to become a Christian, although, as Jesus said, that crucial decision needs to be made. But we are called upon to make choices every moment of every day in our lives for or against the loving power of God. What we read, what we watch, what we do, who we listen to, how we spend our time, where we direct our thoughts, our standards of behaviour, our priorities - all of this is part of the choice we make whether to involve God or to banish him from our lives. Jesus did say did he not, that there would many who called him their "Lord" who would one day realise that they had actually had nothing to do him for many years now.

God is there whenever we want him-make no mistake about that. He does not sulk or throw tantrums if we have not spoken to him for a while. But the more we seek him out, the more we involve him in our day to day living, the easier we shall find it to be reassured by his love, to live in his power, to get our lives moving in the right direction and, when difficult times do come, find the strength to deal with them. Choosing God and choosing Christ is a day by day, hour by hour decision.

Is it wonderful or is it terrible to be human and free to make your own choices? A bit of both, I suppose. But with a God who is on our side we can delight in the wonder and we can deal with the terror.

Amen.