

My brother, Paul, had a birthday this week. We had a very fun Zoom call where we joined with him and other members of the family. The highlight of the call was him showing us his birthday cards that he'd received. Paul's a very sensitive and creative guy, and he takes great care in choosing the cards for special occasions for his friends and family, and they normally do the same for him. But this year he had a very motley selection of birthday cards. For example, he had one which featured a man clearly playing golf. Well, my brother's never touched a golf club in his life. And there was another one of a fluffy dog, and Paul has less affinity with dogs even than I do.

These cards weren't coming from distant aunts who rarely see him, they were from his nearest and dearest. And there's a reason for their inappropriateness. England is back in a very restrictive lockdown, and the only place that you can buy a birthday card at the moment is the chemist. They've nearly sold out, and they didn't have a good choice to start with. So they don't have many cards for people to choose from. They offer no choice, so you have to take whatever card that they have available, whether it's appropriate or not.

We all like to have a choice. We like to be able to choose. I want to say something this morning about choice, because it strikes me that choice plays a very significant part in the story of Lent and Easter. Let's begin with the gospel set for today. This is Saint Mark at his most quickfire self. In just a few verses we go from Jesus's baptism, to his temptation, to the beginning of his ministry. Boom, boom, boom. There's very little detail, and the action moves along very swiftly. The transition from the baptism to the temptation of Jesus seems particularly abrupt. No sooner does the Heavenly Father say, "You are my Son with whom I am well pleased," then straight away, immediately it says, the spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. No time to savor the moment there.

The word for drove is a strong word, as in the spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. It's a strong word.

It's the same word that's used by the gospel writers to describe Jesus driving out demons. It could be translated as thrust, Jesus was thrust into the wilderness by the Spirit. Whatever word we choose, the point is to show that when it came to going into the wilderness, Jesus had no choice, He was pushed there. Jesus did not choose the wilderness.

None of us chooses a wilderness experience. We don't volunteer for pain, for loss, anger, terror. We didn't choose to be in a pandemic. We never choose wilderness, but the wilderness happens anyway. Whether it comes to us in the guise of a pandemic, a frightening hospital stay, a loss, a bereavement, a broken relationship, a loss of faith, the wilderness appears unbidden and unwelcome at our doorstep. And sometimes it is God's spirit that drives us there.

Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us, that God wants us to suffer? No, it doesn't. But does it mean that God is ready to teach, shape, and redeem us even during the most barren periods of our life? Then yes. In the startling economy of God, even a dangerous desert can become holy, even our wilderness wanderings can reveal the divine. This is not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a chaotic, fragile, and broken world that includes deserts, and because God's way is to take the shadow of death and ring from it resurrection. Jesus didn't choose to go into the wilderness. But when He was there, He made lots of significant choices.

We're never completely stripped of our power to choose. We might feel that life just happens to us, that everything happens by fate or default or some divine fiat, but this is not the case. There's a brilliant book that I know many people have read by Viktor Frankl called Man's Search for Meaning. Frankl was a Holocaust survivor. He realized in those terrible concentration camps that people were stripped of everything, or nearly everything, as Frankl realized that what couldn't be taken from them was their response to the situation in which

they found themselves. Frankl found that he could not be stripped of his power to choose. "Everything," he said, "can be taken from a man, 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. This is very true of Jesus in the wilderness during His temptations. We know from the other gospels that Satan came and tempted Jesus the 40 days He was in the wilderness with the wild beast. The temptations took the form of various choices. Firstly, Satan invited Jesus to turn stones into bread, but He chose not to. Satan then invited Him to prove that He was the Son of God by throwing Himself from the temple and asking the angels to save Him. He chose to decline that offer too.

Then there was a third choice. Satan said, "Choose to worship me and all the splendid kingdoms of the world will be yours." Again, Jesus decided against it. As we go on with the Easter story, we see that Jesus continues to make choices, hard choices. Think of the events of Maundy Thursday. On that day we remember Jesus in the garden of the Mount of Olives. Jesus pleads with His father that, "This cup of suffering be taken from me. But not my will, your will be done. It's not what I want, it's what you want," He prayed. That was the choice He made. He chose the path of suffering, the hard path that led to the redemption of the world.

Think of Good Friday, Jesus before Pontius Pilate, who seemed inclined to release Jesus. And yet Jesus chose to make no defense. He chose not to answer Pilate's questions. Jesus didn't drift towards the cross, neither was He playing a part in some divinely scripted play. Jesus was crucified because He chose to win our salvation. I once had to walk through a picket line to see a film. It's the only time that it's ever happened to me. The film was the Last Temptation of Christ by Martin Scorsese. The nuns on the picket line took exception to the way that the film depicted Jesus being tempted on the cross. The devil appears to Him in the film one

more time and says to Him, "Well, get the angels to come down with You from the cross and live just a normal life of domestic bliss."

Now, of course, the story is not based on the biblical text, it was speculative. But it didn't seem to be heresy, because it fits quite well with the rest of the story in the gospel. Of course, Jesus could have escaped death on the cross. He could have called the angels to help Him and to go a different way. He chose not to. As they say, it wasn't the nails that kept Him there, it was love. Jesus knew that God's plan of salvation involved this loving but painful demonstration of the limitless of divine love. The Lenten and Easter story are all about the choices that Jesus made.

As we seek, particularly in this season of Lent, to follow His way of the cross, let's use the season to examine the choices that we make. Maybe there are areas in which we feel we have no choice. But actually, if we really thought about it and looked at it a different way, perhaps there are choices we can make. Sometimes it suits us because it's comfortable and not challenging to say that we have no choice when we do. Perhaps there are choices that we've made that we could re-examine, that we made a long time ago that perhaps don't suit anymore. And there might be choices that we've made without recognizing that they're choices. Lent is a time for self-examination, for reflection. Let's choose to walk the way of Jesus, the way of love.

Amen.