

Choices

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69

Reflecting on the dark and light times through which our world is passing uneasily, Martyn Percy writes: In 2016, Hartmut Rosa, a professor of sociology, published a simple book called 'Resonance'. Rosa was intrigued by many of the underlying crises of our time: distrust, anxiety, alienation, disenchantment, burnout and more. Put another way, we live in an age of gloom and doom. As Shakespeare says in *Macbeth* (Act III) we are *"...so weary with disasters, tugg'd with fortune, that I would set my life on any chance, to mend, or be rid on't."*

Resonance is a normal human and social experience. It has a transformational impact on our affections and relationships and can counter the alienation of modernity. We may well puzzle at how fascism, populism, autocracy, and dictatorships seem to sway crowds and win support. We are left angered, confused, dismayed by riots in our country, alongside other actions here and abroad where mob mentality, is it Far Right politicking, is it simply the brokenness that lies at the heart of many human lives, is harmful, unlawful and poisonous to society.

Part of the answer may lie in resonance—a rhetoric that taps into personal and communal fears and anxieties and transfers them to other groups. Migrants, minorities and communities that are "othered" will know this to their significant cost. Holocausts and genocides are founded in the resonance of dark myths that stoke fears and anxieties.

Amidst the prevailing gloom and doom of these days, endlessly portrayed on the media, joy emerges as a powerful antidote. It pierces through the darkness like a shaft of light, leading us from despair to hope. Joy is not a superficial emotion but a tangible, deep and authentic force. It

contrasts starkly with the snarling cynicism and bitter rhetoric often dominating our discourse, offering a far higher good.

Joy resonates with us because of its infectious nature and capacity to carry hope, peace, patience, resilience and courage. It is realistic, acknowledging the inevitable fights, hurts and losses. Yet, joy remains undeterred, radiating a profound mystery that is found in Christian faith, a deep spiritual wisdom where love conquers hate, and light prevails over darkness.ⁱ

Who would choose despair over joy, or darkness over light, or hate over love? Are these real choices; is this something in our control? Or is it the case that as we travel through life, whilst we may not manufacture all our choices, we respond and make choices accordingly? To what extent are we in control our own destiny? But we have responsibility in the decisions we take, the choices we make. This does not solve all life's ills, but it gives us the strength, the courage, the faith, to hold on, even if only by our finger tips, with God's help, and the help of the Christian community and all good people around us.

The Book of Joshua is an exciting story of conquest, a testimony to faith, a statistical record, and a geography. It is also a theological and pastoral account of how God relates to God's chosen people, and how they relate to God.ⁱⁱ It is a book, ultimately, about choices. After long years of wandering in the wilderness, after the death of Moses, leadership passes on to Joshua. They cross the river Jordan, they enter into the Promised Land God promised to the Hebrew slaves, and they prepare to settle down. A choice lay before the people of Israel. In this land they are about to enter, there will be other lifestyles, other ways of doing things, other so-called gods, maybe light and dark issues. Will they choose those ways, or will they, like Joshua, remain true to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? The chequered faith history of God's people during the wilderness years, of remaining true to God or abandoning God is well-known. When these Old Testament

books were being written to help Israel remember her history during the time of the later Babylonian exile, similar challenges and choices were before them once again. For the people of God today it is the same. Do we follow the gods of our generation: possessions, money, work hours, leisure, sport, political ideologies; or do we make the choice for God that does not exclude modern life, but makes it clear that we are Christians, not ashamed of our faith, ready to make commitment, even sacrifice, for what we believe. Choosing Whom we will serve is the central theme of our reading from Joshua, and it is echoed in John's Gospel where Jesus has been teaching the crowds. Choosing faith in any age is not always going to be a walk in the park. Sometimes it is hard. Those crowds following Jesus listened to His words: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?..." After this many of His disciples drew back and no longer went about with Him.' Jesus put the same choice to His closest followers: "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life..."

Choices.

For the Israelites in Joshua's time – were they clear they wanted to serve the Lord Who alone had the power to save them? For the followers of Jesus – were they clear that they wanted to follow Him, for He had the words of eternal life? Who would choose otherwise? Yet some did, and some do. Is it because they recognise the extent of the demands faith will make, and that a relationship with God requires, is that why it is too hard, too demanding? Do we who have accepted God's call struggle enough with what it is that God calls us to do and to be? These are big questions, and they don't have straightforward answers. Choices we make, and do not make, have consequences. It is what defines who we are and what we become. Each thought, each word, each action is the result of some decision or other, some choice that we have made.

It can feel overwhelming put like that. Particularly if we think we must respond to everything. We look at the race riots; we look at the suppurating wound of the Israel-Palestine-Lebanon-Iraq-Yemen conflict and feel overwhelmed; we look at what might, or might not, happen in the United States forthcoming election; we look at the cost of living crisis and fuel bills going up again; we look at all the other fractures and dislocations in life – maybe problems at home, or in the work place, or in Church and community – and we may feel numbed, crushed, inadequate, insignificant, incapable. Who are we? What can we possibly do to make a difference. I know this is an issue that confronts and depresses many of you. I know it confronts me.

Let me take you back to our Old Testameny reading. Geography sometimes serves theological purposes in the book of Joshua. The place Shechem is a place of promise. It was an ancient biblical city, now an archaeological site near modern Nablus on the West Bank. It was the place where Abraham received God's promise of the Promised Land. It is the place where Jacob led his household to bury false idols. It is the site where Joseph (of the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat) was buried. The place is important because it is a place of promise, a place of rejecting false gods, and the place where people of every generation can be reminded of the importance of choices. Not only ours for God; but most wonderful of all, God's for us.

We have chosen God. But remember that God has chosen us. *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine...Fear not, for I am with you"*ⁱⁱⁱ, says God.

Does that stop all the bad things from happening? No. Does it mean that we are responsible for fixing everything? No. But it does mean that we can **choose** to do what we **can** do in areas where we have agency, when we can do something to make a difference, or where we through lobbying and campaigning can impress the need on higher authorities than ours that something needs to be done.

In relation to the Middle East; in relation to concerns about immigration and the treatment of migrants; in relation to the economy and food and fuel poverty; in relation to the care and nurture of young people; in relation to concern about Arts funding; in relation to the support of people with Dementia, or those with insufficient clothing, or no access to adequate health care. At some level, we can make a choice to do something within our powers, if not beyond them. When we do, we demonstrate that we have chosen God Who chooses justice and inclusion and love. God Who has chosen us to work alongside Him where we are able. Not fixing everything; but fixing something.

Choices matter. Choose well. Choose God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

ⁱ *Martyn Percy, Prospect Magazine Article, 21st August 2024*

ⁱⁱ *Susan Henry Crow, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol3 p362*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 57:1, 5*