

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday October 26th 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“No Pain, No Choice”**

“To act faithfully is a matter of your own choice... stretch out your hand for whatever you choose” (Ecclesiasticus 15:15, 16).

As we think about our discipleship of Jesus Christ, the surrender of all that we are and all that we possess to Him, so we must think inevitably of the choices we are called to make. It is, as we shall see, sometimes painful and hard to make good choices; but it is always, as we have seen last Sunday, part of our God-given vocation to choose.

Now some choices are not too difficult. For instance... I read last week that there is a furor in the Mormon Church that some of their young male missionaries have appeared, shirtless, in a new calendar. Fear not, this missionary for Christ will not be participating... and it's not because I am not a Mormon!

But some choices are difficult – they entail and necessitate some real difficulty!

Consider, for instance, the vocation to love!

This week a couple told me of their plans to celebrate prior to their wedding... each with their respective wedding party and friends. The groom will be going “white water rafting”; the bride... “zip-lining” which, according to Wikipedia, is an aerial runway designed to enable a user propelled by gravity to traverse from the top to the bottom of the inclined cable, usually made of stainless steel, by holding on or attaching to the freely moving pulley... and it adds “this is often a means of entertainment” (I am glad to be thus informed!). After hearing this, my comment, “Wow, some adrenalin rush... just what is needed for marriage”. In fact, just what is needed to love!

Pity the lawyer... the one, I assume, volunteered by his colleagues to ask Jesus a question, “to test him”. “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?”. With astounding autonomy and wonderful wisdom Jesus answers... but on his own terms and gives two commandments, not one. “Love God, love your neighbour”... in fact, perhaps our Lord even gives a third (?), “Love yourself”.

In her spiritual autobiography “Called Out of Darkness”, the writer of vampire novels, Anne Rice, tells that she was without faith in God and the Church for 38 years. In 1998 she experienced a profound conversion. Ms. Rice tells of the time when she was asked by a television interviewer “How as returning to Christ actually influenced your life?”. She writes, “I found myself thinking about this and then answering, ‘It demands of me that I love people.’”. She adds, “This was a turning point, this simple acknowledgement”. And latter writes, “We kid ourselves if we think this is ‘feel-good Christianity’. This is Christianity! If it isn't Christianity, then what can Christianity possibly be? It's the toughest way to live that there is”.

I was challenged by Ms. Rice's words... my returning, my conversion, to Christ "demands of me that I love people". There are people that I find it difficult to love, and doubtless the compliment is returned! I decided this morning that it is my choice... whether to ask God to help me to love anyone I consider unlovable... or not to ask; whether to ask Him for grace and strength and power to love... or not to ask. How about you?

We hesitate to love with abandon... we hesitate to become vulnerable... and so we make a choice, "There are some... I will not love".

With prescient clarity Moses demurred from accepting the divine vocation to lead the people of God... imagine a media interviewer reviewing all the difficulties that Moses had faced, the heartaches he endured as he led the people and the imminent disappointment of seeing, but not entering, the promised land. And then the interviewer asks the question, "So Moses... knowing then what you know now, would you have made a different choice as you stood by the burning bush?". Silence... and then Moses replies, "No... a hard choice, a difficult choice... but the right one!".

And Paul... this apostle to the Gentiles, this forceful (sometimes acerbic) disciple was also, by his own reckoning, "like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children". Often he was hurt, slandered, pilloried and shunned... by those he served. Again the interviewer, "So Paul... knowing then what you know now, would you have made a different choice on that road to Damascus?". Silence... and then Paul replies, "No... a hard choice, a difficult choice... but the right one!".

Elsewhere in her book, Ms. Rice talks of "sitting in the pew and going through The Great Negotiation [with God] – what I gave and what I didn't give, what I wanted to do and what I feared to do". Many choices are difficult!

Later in this service, a member of the Church, tells of her choice to give money to God to support the ministries and programs of the Church... for none of us should this be an easy, facile choice. It must, it should involve some difficulty, some challenge.

In a wonderful article, in November 4th's Christian Century, Martin Marty, quoting Fr. Andrew Greeley, writes "of the generosity of God... '[it is] passionately loving', appearing 'bizarre to our careful, rational human calculations' and may even seem 'mad, lunatic, insane' for the way it violates such calculations".

The commitment, the decision we make to love others but, above all, to love God will, at times, be difficult and may even appear bizarre, mad, lunatic and insane... but this is how God loves us, may we thus love Him. Amen.