

One thing which is very important to most, if not all of us is to feel that we are in control of our own lives. As we grow up we gradually learn to make our own decisions, push the boundaries, find out what works for us and what doesn't. Anyone who has survived teenagers knows how difficult (for everyone) this can be – and if your children are not yet at that stage, be warned! Ultimately the best we can hope for is that we've set a reasonable example and have managed to instil the basic principles of a decent life. By the time they set off into the world under their own steam, they are in control. However hard it feels, we have to allow them that freedom, because we also expect it for ourselves. Today's western society regards much restriction of personal freedom as abuse, but this little peroration has not been inspired by recent episodes of 'The Archers', which I haven't heard. It was actually provoked by thinking about today's readings.

Two people, Peter and Saul. Both were strong characters, making their own decisions, choosing their own way, not afraid to make their opinions known, neither likely to be easily influenced by others. By this stage in the Gospel we already know a lot about Peter. He is loyal, enthusiastic, impulsive, quick to commit and equally quick, despite his best intentions, to say or do the wrong thing. Today's reading shows us the typical Peter once more, jumping into the water when he realises Jesus is on the shore, but rather oddly putting some clothes on first. Then after everyone has had breakfast, he is upset because Jesus challenges him three times, not understanding that this is the opportunity to wipe out his three Good Friday denials. As Peter finally receives his commission, Jesus, who knows him all too well, warns him: you thought you were in control, but this commitment will take you where you do not want to go.

We know much less about Saul at this stage in the New Testament. A few months later he appeared as a bystander and witness when Stephen was stoned, and then as a ruthless persecutor of the Christian community which had spread from Judea into Galilee and Samaria. He was well known to the Jewish hierarchy and sufficiently trusted by them to be authorised to capture and imprison Christians in Samaria. He was not only firmly in control of his own life, but was so convinced of the rightness of his own position that he knew he was entitled to control other people's beliefs as well. He already had a reputation. Christians knew he was dangerous. Yet almost the same thing happened to him as to Peter. He was challenged by someone whom he immediately addressed as 'Lord' even before the someone revealed his identity, and he was then, quite literally, taken where he did not want to go. Ananias, the other person in this drama, didn't want to go where he was sent either, and had to be explicitly assured that it would not be dangerous.

'You will be taken where you do not want to go.' This is so often the call that God makes, and if we think hard about it, it is frightening. I'm sure I'm not the only person to have prayed for God's guidance in particular circumstances when, if I'm really honest, what I've wanted is some sort of reassurance about what I've already decided to do. I don't want God to take me, or nudge me, in a different direction.

If you've been at St Peter's for a few years you may remember that Father Mark always used the Methodist covenant prayer on one Sunday in the year. It goes like this:

I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
Put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
Exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Its implications are terrifying. 'I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.' Twelve words and three huge problems. 'Freely and wholeheartedly': no reservations, no conditions, no grudges, no 'yes but' or 'not yet'. 'Yield all things': possessions, ambitions, status, relationships, abilities, possibilities. 'Your pleasure and disposal': How can we know what that is? Will we be hurt, like Peter, because God keeps prodding us to act in a particular way? Will we be blind, like Saul, until someone comes to explain what is going on? Will we try to line God up with our own plans, because we're pretty decent people really, so it must be OK?

Or can we learn to listen to God, which is difficult, and to trust him completely, which is even harder? That is what just one person in the whole of creation has managed to do perfectly – and even Jesus was taken where he did not want to go. That is what Easter gives us. That is what is meant by living a Christian life. We have the example of Jesus to follow, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to guide us, and a loving and merciful Father to forgive us and set us right when we fail. The covenant made on earth is already being ratified in heaven.