

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 10th March 2019

Luke 4: 1 - 13

Do you think it would be a good idea if the state gave all young people on their 18th birthday a large lump sum of money, say £15,000, to spend in any way they please?

Julian Le Grand, a professor of social policy at the London School of Economics, thinks so. In a book about redefining public services¹ Professor Julian Le Grand argues that the single most effective way to reduce inequalities in society is to levy an inheritance tax of almost 100%, and to give the proceeds of that tax to young people on their 18th birthday.

From an economist's point of view Prof Le Grand might be right. If the state takes everyone's wealth when they die and redistributes it amongst the population, that would most likely dramatically reduce inherited inequality. No longer would the children of wealthy parents get such a significant head start in life. And, the children of poorer parents would find it less of a struggle to access many of the benefits that wealth brings.

Despite its attractiveness Prof Le Grand's proposal is unlikely to catch on. As a policy it faces much opposition, not least from the very wealthy who would rather that their own children benefit most from their hard work. But the principal opposition to the proposal comes from most older adults and particularly parents, wealthy or poor, who believe that giving young people a free gift of £15,000 on their 18th birthday is a dangerous proposition. Wouldn't those young people, inexperienced in life as they are, waste that unearned money in short time on drink, drugs and partying, or at the very least on fast cars and long holidays?

Most people think so. But, it turns out most people are mostly wrong. When given the responsibility to make their own choices, and crucially the help to consider the options available to them, most people, most of the time make wise choices whatever age they are, whether they are 18, 8, or 80. Where giving young people a lump sum of money has been tried, argues Prof Le Grand, 18 year olds rarely waste that money. Instead they tend to invest it either in the bank; or in their education (they spend it on fees to go to university, for example), or on a job (they start a business), or in property (they use it as a down payment on a house), or in their long-term health (they use the money to buy medical insurance).

There has always been a debate about the extent to which people have the freedom, or should have the freedom, to make choices for themselves. In the church theologians have debated for centuries the extent to which we have freewill, or whether God maps out the fate of our lives for us. In science today there is much debate about how much control we have really over the choices we make. But, there is no doubt that our society in particular is built on the assumption that we can choose, and that we do.

In commerce there is an entire industry, Marketing, that seeks to influence the choices we make. The economic and political principals that structure our society - democracy and capitalism - are built on the foundations of choice. Socially, in our relationships with each other, we are freer to choose than ever before: there are very few arranged marriages; divorce is common; tribes, clans and gangs are looked upon with suspicion.

¹ *Motivation, Agency, and Public Policy: Of Knights and Knaves, Pawns and Queens*, Le Grand J, Oxford (2003)

In this world, we have to choose: we have to choose how to live; whom to live with; and whom will govern our lives.

If we don't choose, you can be sure there will be someone who will find a way to choose for you. All this choice can feel stressful, after all sometimes the risks associated with making the wrong choices can be high. But, on the other hand, having no choice is most often even more stressful. Who would we be as individuals or as a society if there was only one product on offer and we had to choose that one; one political party to choose and we had to vote for that one; only one person available, and we had to marry him or her?

Choices are so important for individuals and for society as a whole that people with power find it very difficult to stop themselves from using their power to make other people's choices for them. Parents are often very good at doing that. After all, babies are born helpless, and from an early age parents feel the pressure of responsibility of the choices they make on behalf of their children. But, unfortunately, once they start, parents often can't stop, and before you know it, they are introducing you to the fine young man or the lovely young woman they think you should spend the rest of your life with.

There is much evidence to show that one of the best things parents can do to bring up thriving children is to teach them how to make choices for themselves, how to support them in making choices instead of taking their choices away from them, and how their children can learn from the consequences of the supported choices their children make. When we make a choice for ourselves, with help, and are prepared to live with the consequences of that choice, we find that we develop a sense of agency and purpose in our lives, and a sense of identity to our existence.

Given the ubiquity of choice in the world, the importance of choosing, the importance of living with consequences, and the importance of receiving support in making our choices is it any surprise that Jesus' father, just as soon as he had declared himself to be his father, drove his son in to the wilderness - making choices can often feel like a wilderness of indecision and procrastination – do that he could choose his future for himself.

We call them temptations, some Bible translations call them tests, but I wonder if in 21st century democratic, capitalist societies we wouldn't understand better what was happening in the Gospel passage we read this morning if we called them choice.

You might wonder what God was doing actively leading Jesus in to the wilderness, and by so doing bringing him in to contact with the devil, but you shouldn't. There are few things more important in life than learning how to choose because throughout your life you are going to have to choose. And second only to that by a short head, is the importance of being supported when you make a choice. Jesus wasn't alone in the wilderness, the Holy Spirit was with him, supporting him. Luke says, 'Full of the Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan,' (that was where he was baptised, and where God had declared himself to be his father), 'and for forty days was led by the Spirit up and down the wilderness and tempted by the devil.'

If mum and dad could only be more like God, and say - as God is saying to Jesus -, 'at the end of the day it is your choice, you have to live with the consequences, but know that we are here to help you make your choice.'

When parents become expert at doing that, then they can feel free to give young people £15,000 on their 18th birthday and have some confidence that although there will always be a risk that their child will make the wrong choice, it is most probable that their gift will be the making of their child.

When God did that with Jesus, his son, when he gave him a choice after his baptism, at the beginning of his adulthood as it were, the stakes were much higher than what an average young person might do wrong with £15,000.

Jesus was presented with three types of slavery: the slavery of greed, the desire to possess more and more material possessions ("tell these stones to become bread"); the slavery of power, the desire to rule for glory and power ("all this dominion I will give to you"); and the slavery of security, the desire to protect yourself no matter the cost to others.

One other reason why choices might be a better word to describe these things than temptations is that what the devil was offering were not in and of themselves evil things.

We need bread to survive, after all, and if Jesus could have turned stones to bread then he could have fed the hungry. We need rulers in positions of power who rule well. Had Jesus chosen to take the devil's offer of dominion over the kingdoms of the world then he could have ruled with justice. We need security in our lives, and if Jesus had chosen the devil's challenge to be rescued by angels, he could have ensured that none of us would ever fall or fail.

These aren't bad things, in and of themselves, it is just that when someone has complete control over them then none of us have any control in our lives – none of us would ever have a choice to make again. These choices Jesus was presented with were indeed tempting; they were slaveries. He would have been enslaved to materialism, power and security, and we would have been enslaved to him.

At the end of those forty days the devil departed, says Luke, biding his time. That ominous final phrase is a bit of a cliff-hanger if ever there was one, and it encourages us to read on, but it also signals that what had happened in the wilderness was that Jesus, supported by the Holy Spirit, learned how to make a choice. That would serve him well towards the end of his life in the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus had chosen. He hadn't just chosen to reject the slavery of material possession, power and security, he had also made a positive choice. He had chosen obedience, obedience to God. Obedience and slavery are often thought of as meaning the same thing. But, they do not. And the difference is choice. When we are forced to obey, that is slavery, when we choose to do so, that is obedience. That is why you are not a slave at work when you do as your boss says. But, when you are bullied in to doing something, you feel that you are living under someone's coercive power.

Jesus chose to follow God's will for him, he chose the much more difficult journey to show the world the way to both spiritual and material sufficiency; the way power is best used; and the way security often grows out of vulnerability. That is to say, Jesus chose the way of sacrificial,

vulnerable love that sets us free so that we too can make our choices in this world, supported by him, and then grow up to become much more mature, whole thriving people.

The season of Lent is a season when we reflect on the choices we make in life, and how we make those choices. What are the things that seek to control our lives: where are we vulnerable to greed; where are we vulnerable to the desire to hold power over others; where are we vulnerable to our dependence on feeling secure?

But, first of all, on this first Sunday in Lent, this week is the opportunity to remember that if we are to be the people God wants us to become, then we must choose. We have to choose our path through life, we have to live with the consequences of the choices we make, but we don't have to make these choices on our own, there's help if we want it. In this wilderness world of every day choices, God is saying to you: it is your life, you are free to choose how to live it and you must live with the consequences, but I am here to help if you need it.