

**St. Barnabas Church 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023**  
**The Gift of Choice**

It's the month of May and TT is almost upon us during which we will witness wonderful motorcycle riders, the greatest of whom was Joey Dunlop.

He had been taking part in the TT races for many years when it was discovered that he didn't have a normal road licence, so he sat his driving test which he successfully passed.

This was unlike my classmate who took his test and neither passed or failed! When he arrived at the Test Centre, the examiner asked him questions about the Highway Code, checked his bike and watched him as he drove back and forth along the test area.

He was then given instructions to drive round a specified route whilst the examiner would watch him from various vantage points and he had to do an emergency stop when he passed the examiner who would be holding out his clipboard.

After a very long session during which he did not see the examiner, my classmate returned to the Test Centre, only to be told that his test had been suspended.

Apparently, the examiner had been involved in an accident and taken to the local hospital.

He had held out his clipboard and stepped off the pavement in front of a different but similar motorbike and was knocked down.

So much for the examiner's choice and power of observation!

Now compare this story with what happened to two brothers as they observed their alcoholic father when they were growing up.

In a small village the two brothers lived with their father who was abusive towards his sons and beat them.

When the boys grew up, the elder brother became an alcoholic like his father and the younger brother became a successful businessman.

So, the villagers wondered why they had turned out to be so different and they decided to ask them.

When they met the elder brother he was lying drunk on the floor and after he had sobered up they asked him why he drank so much.

He answered, *"My father was an alcoholic and used to beat up both of us. What can you expect after being abused for such a long time? I followed after my father's footsteps and became same as him."*

When they met the younger brother they asked him: *"You are such a successful businessman and respected by everyone in the community, from where do you get your inspiration?"*

He answered, *"My father."*

Everyone was surprised and asked, “*Why?*”

He replied, “*My father was an alcoholic and he used to beat us when drunk. I used to watch all this silently and that’s when I decided not to be like him. I wanted to be decent, respected and become successful. That is what I became.*”

What we are depends on our thinking which either makes us a good person or otherwise – the choice is ours.

In the 1800’s Edwin Thomas, his stage name, was a well known Shakespearean actor and he had two brothers, John and Junius who were also actors but they never rose to the same stature of Edwin. In 1863, the three brothers performed together in Julius Caesar and the fact that Edwin’s brother John took the role of Brutus was a foretaste of what awaited the brothers – and the nation – two years later.

John who played the assassin in Julius Caesar is the same John who took the role of the assassin in the Washington Theatre on a crisp April night in 1865. He crept into the rear of a box in the theatre and shot Abraham Lincoln in the head.

At that time he was the President of the United States of America.

The surname of the brothers was Booth – Edwin Thomas Booth and John Wilkes Booth.

Edwin was never the same after that night and shame from his brother’s crime drove him into retirement.

He might never have returned to the stage had it not been for a twist of fate at a New Jersey train station.

Edwin was waiting for his train when a well-dressed young man was pushed by the crowd and fell between the platform and a moving train. Without hesitation, Edwin locked a leg round a railing, grabbed the man and pulled him to safety.

Edwin didn’t recognise the young man he had rescued but the young man recognised him and a few weeks later Edwin received a letter from General Adams Budeau, Chief Secretary to General Ulyssess S. Grant thanking him for saving the life of the child of an American hero, Abraham Lincoln.

The boy Edwin Booth had yanked to safety was Robert Todd Lincoln.

How ironic that while one brother killed the president, the other brother saved the president’s son.

**Edwin and John Booth.** Same father, mother, profession and passion – yet one chooses life and the other, death.

How could it happen? Who knows but it does.

Though their story is dramatic, it’s not unique.

**Abel and Cain**, both sons of Adam. Abel chooses God: Cain chooses murder and God lets him.

**Abraham and Lot**, both pilgrims in Canaan: Abraham chooses God, Lot chooses Sodom and God lets him.

**David and Saul**, both kings of Israel: David chooses God, Saul chooses power and God lets him.

**Peter and Judas**, both deny their Lord: Peter seeks mercy, Judas seeks death and God lets him.

Throughout history and in Scripture, the truth is revealed: God allows us to make our own choices and according to Jesus, we can choose:

- *a narrow gate or a wide gate* (Matt. 7:13-14)
- *a narrow road or a broad road* (Matt. 7:13-14)

We can choose to:

- *build on rock or sand* (Matt. 7:24-27)
- *serve God or riches* (Matt. 6:24)
- *be numbered among the sheep or the goats* (Matt. 25:32-33)

Matthew 25:32-34, *“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”*

Those who reject God will go to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

God gives eternal choices, and these choices have eternal consequences.

Isn't this the reminder of Calvary's trio?

Have you ever wondered why there were two crosses next to Christ?

Why not six or ten and why was Jesus in the centre?

Why not on the far right or far left?

Could it be that the two crosses on the hill symbolize one of God's greatest gifts? The gift of choice.

The two criminals have so much in common:

- connected by the same system
- condemned to the same death
- surrounded by the same crowd
- equally close to the same Jesus.

In fact, they began with the same sarcasm: *“The two criminals also said cruel things to Jesus.”* (Matt. 27:44). But one changed.

Luke 23:39-43, *“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other*

*rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

Many writers have written about the prayer of the penitent thief which certainly warrants our attention but while we rejoice at the thief who changed, dare we forget the one who didn't?

Wouldn't a personal invitation from Jesus be appropriate?

Wouldn't a word of persuasion be timely?

- Didn't the shepherd leave the ninety-nine sheep and pursue the one that was lost?
- Didn't the housewife sweep the house until the lost coin was found?

However, the father of the prodigal son did nothing.

- The sheep was lost innocently
- The coin was lost irresponsibly.
- The prodigal son left intentionally.

The father gave him the choice and Jesus gave both criminals the same.

There are times when God allows trials to stir us.

There are times when God sends blessings to lure us.

But then there are times when God sends nothing but silence as He honours us with the freedom to choose where we spend eternity.

What an honour that is!

In so many areas of life we have no choice:

- We didn't choose our gender.
- We didn't choose our siblings.
- We didn't choose our race or place of birth.

Sometimes our lack of choices angers us and we say it's not fair but the scales of life were forever tipped on the side of fairness when God planted a tree in the Garden of Eden.

All complaints were silenced when Adam and his descendants were given free will, the freedom to make whatever eternal choice we desire.

Any injustice in this life is offset by the honour of choosing our destiny in the next.

We must be truthful and agree with that and not prefer the opposite.

It would be nice if God would let us order good things in this life such as excellent health and a high IQ but it doesn't happen.

When it comes to our life on earth, we aren't given a choice or a vote but we are when it comes to life after death.

We haven't been given any greater privilege than that of choice. Not only does this privilege offset any injustice, the gift of free will can offset any mistakes.

Think about the thief who repented.

Though we know little about him, we know this:

- He made some bad mistakes in life.
- He chose the wrong crowd, the wrong morals, the wrong behaviour.

Yet we would not consider his life a waste because he will spend eternity not reaping the fruit of all the bad choices he made but the exact opposite.

He will be enjoying the fruit of the one good choice he made and in the end, all his bad choices were redeemed by a solitary good one.

All of us have made some bad choices in life.

We have chosen the wrong friends, maybe the wrong career, even the wrong spouse.

We look back over our life and say, *"If only... if only I could make up for those bad choices."*

Well, we can!

One good choice for eternity offsets a thousand bad ones on earth.

The choice is ours.

- How can two brothers be born of the same mother, grow up in the same home, and one choose life and the other choose death? I don't know the answer but they did.
- How can two men see the same Jesus and one choose to mock him and the other chooses to pray to him? I don't know the answer, but they did. When one of them prayed, Jesus loved him enough to save him and when the other mocked, Jesus loved him enough to let him. He allowed the choice.

He does the same for us.

Bible readings: Matthew 27:11-26; Genesis 4:1-16; James 1:1-18; Psalm 77:1-15