

Lections: Acts 9.31-42; John 6.60-69

White rose or red rose, Lancastrian or Yorkist? Which side would you be on? Here we are in one of the places that for me symbolises the choices that we have to make, this historic church linked so much with that ancient and still powerful Duchy of Lancaster. Cavalier or Roundhead? Remainder or Brexiter? Tory, UKIP, Labour, Lib Dem or Green? Catholic or protestant? High Church or Low Church, even Lancashire Low? It seems that whatever it is we're thinking about there's a choice to be made and here, and tomorrow in France, some pretty difficult decisions and choices have to be made and some of them fundamentally important to how we see ourselves as people, as nations, as communities, wider, stronger than the sum of small, individual parts.

This year is the anniversary of two revolutions that changed Europe and then the rest of the world. 500 years ago in Wittenberg in Germany a monk nailed a document to the door of the church demanding reforms to the nature of the Catholic church. This act by Martin Luther was the beginning of that process of reform that we know as the Reformation. The ripples from that simple act of protest would move across Europe and have its effects here in England and help create the church that we are.

Similarly, 100 years ago Russia was caught up in a revolution that in the same way to the Reformation had effects across national borders. Communism, Marxism, Leninism, political philosophies challenging the status quo, the reading of history and the place of faith in society have affected all of us, even those where that ideology has been much diluted and opposed.

Which side you were on in the reformation became a life or death issue, which side you were on in the Russian Revolution was certainly a life or death issue.

So it's fascinating to read in the Gospel for this Mass, set for today, that choices were there even amongst the followers of Jesus. We can imagine, through rose coloured spectacles, that it was lovely being a disciple and following Jesus, listening to him, day in, day out, sitting like Mary at his feet – it sounds like heaven. But according to John it was anything but easy.

*'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'*

That was the response of some people to what they were hearing and it was so hard that some of those who were following made the difficult decision, the difficult choice. John tells us

*Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*

They made their choice – white rose or red, protestant or catholic, communist or capitalist, following Jesus or rejecting him. We make our choices in small ways or large, but often in life changing ways. 'Are you with me or against me?' asks Jesus at one point.

Jesus challenges the twelve who are still with him

*'Do you also wish to go away?'*

Peter speaks up for them, Peter who'll shortly deny that he knows Jesus, speaks up for the others, including Judas who'll very soon betray Jesus, he speaks up for them all when he says

*'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'*

I find this one of the most powerful stories in the whole of the gospel, this story about choice, this story about discipleship.

It doesn't matter if we're a bishop or a priest, it doesn't matter if we have been an altar server for years and years and years like some of you, or if you've only been serving for a few years or a few months, it doesn't matter if

you're an organist, in the choir or in the congregation, we all have to face up to the question of whether we're going to stay with Jesus or walk away from him.

That's the basic question of the Christian life. And it doesn't mean that because you decided to stay yesterday that you'd give the same answer today. In reality those disciples were as unsure and flawed as we are. Peter's answer might be strong and affirming in that moment, inspirational for us to listen to, but when he was warming himself by a fire in fear of his own life he'd decide to walk away; when Judas didn't see things going the way he wanted them to go he decided his only option was betrayal.

But then I'm encouraged by the example of others, someone like Tabitha, known as Dorcas, in our First Reading. She was a great member of her congregation 'devoted to good works and acts of charity'. We often find people like Dorcas, someone good with a needle who keeps the albs in good order, shortening and lengthening cassocks as needed by servers and the choir, laundering and repairing the linens, keeping the vestments in the best state possible. She was the kind of person in a congregation that we call 'the salt of the earth' and every parish needs a Dorcas.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the early church, we witness the grief that her death causes in the community and then the joy as God, through Peter, brings her back from the dead.

But for Dorcas, like all of us, following Jesus is not an easy thing nor should it be. 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' was what the people said who left but also perhaps what those who decided to stay with Jesus thought. The choice we make when deciding to follow Jesus is about the choices we make in living our lives, its ultimately the choice we make about the cross, can we carry it?

Dorcas chose to be a disciple of Jesus in her own community and gave herself to a life of 'good works and acts of charity'. She lived selflessly, for others, she lived a life of service which means, just as Jesus demonstrated, taking the bowl and taking the towel and the master becoming the servant, taking the cross and carrying it to Calvary. In that Upper Room the disciples looked on in amazement; by the Calvary road people looked on. Was this what they were expecting, washing feet, carrying a cross? Could they choose to do that?

We are a Company of Servers, people who've chosen, like Dorcas, to live a life of service, to be crucifers, cross bearers, to live out a ministry of service in church.

No one forces you to do what you do, I hope, you do it because you choose to follow Jesus and serve his body, the church in this way. But for you, as for Bishop Christine, as for me, as for everyone here the choice is always real, will we continue to walk with Jesus, given all the choices that we have to make in life, given all the choices that are open to us in life, or can we say as we come to Jesus in this Mass, as we come to him to feed and satisfied, as we come to him for a cup which will quench our thirst, as we come to him the way, the truth and the life,

*'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'*

Andrew Nunn