

P.S.

## Choices

**A**BOUT TWO MONTHS AGO my family and I moved to America. It wasn't the first time we had been there; in fact I'd spent a month or so there in my early twenties. But it was certainly the first time we'd packed our bags to move there with any kind of permanency. An enormous change!

Many things have struck us during those first few weeks. There are many similarities to the culture we are used to, as one would expect (we're all human, after all, and European life has aped the US in many ways); but there were many differences too; some of them for better, some for worse, some for neither, and some where we just can't make up our minds!

One of the things which has struck us most of all has been the matter of choice. I can't go into a shop to buy a sandwich without making a choice between five types of bread, three types of cheese, a multitude of meats, six dressings, a plethora of salads. I can't buy a coffee without choosing between a seeming infinity of varieties, flavours and sizes. I could not have believed there were so many ways of serving an egg; I go into a supermarket and am confronted by eighteen varieties of humous.

In short, I am completely bamboozled by choice. If consumer choice has grown in the UK (as it most certainly has), it has seen nothing yet. I go down to the local supermarket at the end of my street and I find fruit and vegetables arranged in a manner worthy of the Harrod's Food Hall. A man passes by with a bucket of fresh ice on which to 'serve' the vegetables for me to buy. A series of jets spray the produce with moisture droplets to make that moment of choice irresistible.

It's an interesting dichotomy. In one sense I am in control; I have the right and the power to choose, to determine my destiny (at least in terms of what kind of tomato I will eat). I have free will—as God gave me—and society has contrived to maximally expose that 'power' that I have to live life *my* way and to have just what *I* want, to an almost bizarre extent. Yet in another I am a victim, offered up on the altar of consumerism. For I have to buy *something*; to walk away empty-handed would be more than I could bear. I am a victim, not only because I often allow myself to be manipulated into making choices which are unnecessary and concerning which I have no deep underlying interest, but also because often I don't know *what* I want. Bread would be good

enough. Why do I have to decide whether it will be wheat, white, rye or pumpnickel?

Some choices are tedious; I shall simply have to get used to making them. Some choices are unnecessary and value-neutral; some are wonderful to have; others are potentially harmful and lead to sin. Every day as human beings we make thousands of choices, some of them life-changing, but most of them mundane. In America, it seems, there are even more choices to be made, and the whole issue of just how many decisions one makes in the course of a day has been brought home to our family simply by moving. Decision-making never stops. Having free will and the power to choose in a Western society can be an exhausting business, at least until one gets used to it.

Some choices don't matter, and it is no use getting hung up about them. They are simply a by-product of free will and modern living. But other choices do, and it is important to know the difference and to get the big ones right. Choosing how to spend one's free time is not like choosing a bagel. Choosing the focus of our lives is not like choosing an ice-cream.

So what will I choose? God has given me the right, and I must now exercise it. I must differentiate between big and small, ensuring that the direction of my life is the right one. There is a saying, 'Look after the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves', but this will not work in the choices of life. Unless we have set our course in the big things of life, we will have no context within which to make the small. We shall be too busy with our nose to the ground dealing in this world's affairs.

We are indeed talking about *life* choices. Moses presented the children of Israel with a choice, the most fundamental choice there could ever be. It was a choice of life and death. Society increasingly chooses religions and spiritual paths like it might choose a bagel. But when we come to deal with the One True God this approach will not do. I have a myriad of choices, but there are a few choices which are critical, life-changing and life-giving, and I must ensure that my taking them and my commitment to them is never neglected. Let the bagels, the breads and so forth take care of themselves. There are bigger choices to be made, and it is to these that our energies and concentration must be given.

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