

One of the characters of the last World Cup Final in South Africa was a German octopus that seemed to have an uncanny knack of choosing which side was going to win a particular match. TV cameras would record and send round the world pictures taken as this celebrated octopus climbed onto one flag or another. The strain obviously proved too much because the poor thing expired shortly after the finals were over.

Choice is very much a feature of life. We face choices from the moment we get up in the morning to when we go to bed at night. Most of them are fairly mundane – which shoes will I put on, which coat, jacket, skirt, trousers will we wear today? What will I have for breakfast lunch or dinner? What programme will I watch on the TV? None of these are particularly earth shattering; none are likely to have a lasting impact on my life.

Then there are another level of choices that do have the potential to leave their mark on my life. There are those choices we made in our early days. The choice of friends, the people we chose to spend our spare time with, who influenced the standards we adopted. Maybe our parents did not approve – in a perverse way that could have added to the attraction. The subjects we chose to follow at school, choices that could open or close doors to future prospects of employment or study. The choices we made concerning career, our life partner. These are all choices that each had the potential to have a lasting impact on our lives. Opportunities missed at school, a bad choice regarding our career path, a bad choice made in the area of personal relationships all have the potential to cause major problems in later life. Such choices are important. Regrettably we don't always appreciate their importance until it is too late.

Then there are choices that go to the very heart of life, that arise out of an understanding of ourselves. It is at this level that I would see the question that Moses puts to the people of Israel in the passage we have read as our Old Testament Lesson. As the people prepare, after their period of wandering in the desert, they are asked to choose – who they are and who they serve. For Moses this is a choice that will have far reaching implications for the

people as they assemble that day and for their future in the land. Are they to follow the God who had called them out of Egypt, who had accompanied them in their wanderings in the desert or are they going to adopt the gods and customs of the people of the land they are about to enter.

Choice lies at the heart of the Christian life. At the heart of the services of Baptism and Confirmation lie a set of questions, questions about who we are and who we follow. Questions that are in a very real sense life determining. I often find myself thinking back on remarks by Archbishop Michael Ramsey who spoke of the whole of his life being lived in response to his Baptism, of seeing the promises of Baptism in terms of a yardstick for life. These remarks of the late Archbishop remind me that my Christian faith, the choice I make to follow Christ, must work itself out in the choices of everyday life, in the values I adopt, in the standards I set for myself and others. If a society as a whole would claim to be Christian then these choices must find expression in the way that society orders its life and priorities.

In a very real sense we are a people living in a land who in the last decade have made false choices and who have gone after other gods and we are living with the consequences. For us as a community and as individuals, the next few years will be a period of finding, recovering true and lasting values by which to live. The forthcoming election is one stage in that process, the people we elect, the balance of parties in the next Dail will have a huge influence on our society for many years to come. But our responsibility for the future health of our society will not simply rest with how we choose to cast our votes in a fortnight's time. In a very real sense our politicians in the past have made very convenient scapegoats for the ills of our society when in truth our choice of political leaders has reflected many of the ills in our society; a society that has placed local and sectional interest over and above national priorities. We need to rediscover values of community, the value of time shared with one another, what it means to be the Body of Christ in the world of today.

As they prepared to enter the land, Moses declared to the people:

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, ...”

Out of all the turmoil and false hopes of the past few years may we as individuals and as a society find in the coming days what belongs to our peace.