

Along the track

Decisions, Decisions

There is a marvellous film on Youtube in which some children are asked to sit at a table in a room on their own for five minutes and not touch the marshmallow that is in front of them. If they don't touch it, they get another one. Some of them go through agony, desperately trying to ignore it, a few last the distance but most just give in and eat it! The aim of the exercise is to try to work out why some resisted the temptation and others didn't.

Life is full of thousands upon thousands of choices, large and small. They are all important because they all help to determine who we are, the quality of our lives and our relationships and even the legacy, the imprint that we leave behind. Just about every choice causes us to develop patterns of behaviour. It was a tough call for the children - they had all sorts of reasons why they ate the marshmallow; but they claimed it was never his or her fault!

In his best-selling book *Man's Search for Meaning* Viktor Frankl wrote: "Everything can be taken away from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." In other words, we choose how we will approach, this person, this situation and why we will make this choice. Shifting blame has become an art form in many levels of life, not the least in the field of politics. But the truth is, however, your attitude and mine are always our choice. No matter how bad things are, no one can force us to have a bad attitude, or a good attitude either. Our attitudes don't have to be victims of our circumstances or of other people's conduct. We choose our responses.

We can't blame these children for not lasting the distance. Decisions and attitudes always involve a degree of maturity that we might not expect of someone so young. Lent gives us the gift of reflecting on the choices we make and why and how we make them. It gives us the chance to reflect with some maturity on the attitudes we have built up over the years. Lent is about making new starts, about a change of mindsets and habits, about re-ordering priorities. Lent is about sensitising ourselves to God's daily call to 'live life to the full' and how we enact that in our daily life.

Responding to that certainly takes some degree of maturity, an awareness of our own spiritual maturity, it takes effort and an alertness born of practice to hear the voice of God in all its forms. How often do we stop and listen? Is our prayer a one way conversation? Or perhaps no conversation at all? God speaks to us in ways we can understand and in ways that are sensitive to our readiness to hear and respond.

God in his greatness uses a pedagogy to reveal himself to the human person: he uses human events and words to communicate his plan; he does so progressively and in stages so as to draw even closer to us. (GDC 38, CCC53)

Listening to God is one thing. Having the spiritual depth to hear God, to discern the word of God from all the other voices around us and, most of all, within us, is entirely another. We do not, after all, "hear God" at sixteen the way we hear God at thirty or forty or sixty or seventy. No, we grow into the call, the daily invitation of God. All of us. Slowly. That's why God's revealing Himself or Herself to us comes progressively and in stages.

Not many of us are faced with the choice between Good and Evil. Some of us maybe, but not many of us, I suspect. Most of us are faced with the choice between what is good—and what is best, what enhances our lives and that of others or what actions of ours bring grace to a situation or exploit it. Most of us find ourselves deciding between competing commitments, perhaps between work and family, doing the right thing or doing what we feel like doing, between chasing the almighty dollar and being available to others, to being of some service to those who need us. We sometimes have to fight feelings of jealousy rather than genuine feelings of happiness for those who have succeeded. We sometimes have to make conflicting choices involving status and ambition or perhaps choices which concern the spiritual dimension of life, in other words whether we do what we discover God is asking of us or is it a matter of what we think God should do, what we want God to do.

Lent reminds us that there is a restlessness within each one of us that needs to be satisfied. It isn't a compulsive greed for every experience we can chase after; that may be a hallmark of younger years but rather it is a call to move on, to keep searching, to keep going deeper. That can be the catalyst for a more mature and responsive faith. That restlessness is a gift of the Holy Spirit, the one who also gifts us with the urge for charity, for a generosity of spirit and kindness, for joy and peace of mind, for patience, endurance and constancy when the going gets tough, the underlying urge to do good, even if we don't manage to do that every time the occasion arises. It is the gift of self-control and faithfulness when we are drawn towards unfaithfulness in our commitments. These are gifts, the seeds of the attitudes which we can choose and develop – they are on offer when God invites us to live life to the full, to help us choose our way.

Regards

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