

The Big Choice

An old phrase used to talk of “a self-made man”. I think it was understood largely as a financial term - for someone who had been born to poor parents, and had found a way to wealth through his own efforts. Our generation is deeply aware of the fact that life is inherited; our knowledge of genetics makes us ready to think of a person’s life almost as something predetermined, as if joy or grief, failure or flourishing were written in your recipe from the egg. Prophets are figures in the Bible who see things quite differently.

The Mantle Of The Prophet

Compare the words of today’s readings, and their powerful imagery of choice and freedom. Elijah, in what is called a “prophetic deed”, is commanded by God to throw his mantle over the shoulders of Elisha, who is deeply involved with the ploughing of a very substantial field. There is no indication of a previous relationship between them; the introduction of Elisha’s name has all the abruptness of the call of the apostles at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. But the dramatic gesture radically disturbs the younger man; his impulse is to follow Elijah, in the same sense that the disciples follow Jesus: he knows he will have to leave everything to do it, and he only asks for a little negotiation with his parents. Elijah’s response seems to say that he is free to do what he thinks fit. At this Elisha himself performs a “prophetic deed” of his own. He symbolizes his vocation by dramatically slaughtering the pair of oxen, and smashing his plough, which he uses to cook the animals. He then holds a strange “last supper” with his men, and leaves them and the fields behind, in favour of the wandering life of a Northern Prophet.

A Joy To Be Alive

This sort of total deed is the uniting of the personality; there are no escape-clauses or safety-nets: the commitment is complete, for good or ill, and therefore the life ahead stands some chance of carrying the full force of his personality. It is like the acceptance of celibacy for a priest: it means that the priesthood will be the uniting factor in his life. I reckon that must be a necessary ingredient in the survival of any religion: that *some* people at least must be prepared to hand their lives over to it. That must be why the Roman Missal says: *The blood of martyrs*

is the seed of Christians. The totality of their self-giving is a model for something that is vital for everyone; because it doesn’t have to be headline news. Small things are just as capable of becoming gilded with the same light: Sunday Mass, for example; when it’s sunny and the beach invites us, when it rains and the bed says *Give it a miss...*; when we’re feeling spiritual, when we’re feeling wearily mundane; when we’re grateful to be alive, when we half wish we were dead - we go to Mass on Sunday. God is greater than we are, and he has commanded us through the Church to give him this one hour a week *whatever else we do.* This is a witness to ourselves, and to all who see us (and many do) giving it our obedience. You don’t have to slaughter oxen to give a prophetic sign!

Putting Christ First

However lowly the heart, it has its altar; and Christ must be raised up to that altar. If we give him that place, with all the small strength we have, the Law is fulfilled, the Kingdom comes, God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven; and, what is vital for us, we have invested our all in the future that belongs to God. We have Jesus’ promise, not only that this particular investment will bear dramatic fruit, but that it’s the *only* safe place to invest. There is a snag (there always is, on a cast-iron plunger): and it is this. *The firm will only accept a 100% vote of confidence.* There is no room for small investors playing about with part of their pin-money. To cash in at the last day of trading, you have to be all-in. There is a woman waiting for us, in Luke’s 21st chapter, who comes to the Temple Treasury at the same time as Jesus. Rich people are arriving with spectacular showers of gold to offer. She tiptoes up to the trumpet-shaped mouth of the alms-box, and quietly drops in two halfpenny coins; not keeping one, not *sharing*, but giving all she had. Jesus knew her at once, and felt her closeness to him. It wasn’t that she gave much. It was that she gave all, all she had to live on. I know an old man who visits his wife every morning to comb her hair and wash her. She no longer knows him, or even who she herself is, because of Alzheimer’s disease. But as he comes in to her room each and every day, a tremble runs through the ranks of the Seraphim, and the Kingdom of God comes another step closer. *Fr Philip*