

Choosing life in a changing world

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“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live...”

– Deut 30.15-19

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.”

– Ezra 10.10-12

By British standards Rachel was poor. She received financial support from the state, had two children to support, and had several health problems. Money was tight. She sometimes quarrelled with her family. She had a partner who was loving, but Rachel would not accept help from him until he married her (which he finally did only a few days before his death from cancer).

A group of people from the city where Rachel lived began to organize an appeal to help families and children in Romania. Churches were approached to make collections and to “adopt” families for a short time, perhaps a couple of years. Personally, I didn’t approve of bilateral aid convoys and chose not to help.

I discovered to my surprise that Rachel had “adopted” a family. She had all sorts of financial and family reasons not to. Instead she chose to support another family, even in the midst of her own family problems. She could see people whose need she could identify with, and she could help relieve some of the pressures she knew all too well. She didn’t have a great deal of money, but she saved what she could. She asked neighbours and family to give clothes, dried food and furniture for the convoys that went regularly to Romania. And she

wrote and sent pictures and received letters and pictures. She gave her little to bring life.

Rachel chose to extend her own struggle for life to include others' struggles within it. I still don't approve of bilateral aid convoys, but I am humbled by Rachel's choice and how she drew others into this choice, leading them to discover with her a generosity of life. Even in poverty, Rachel demonstrated the power of choice, the power of life, above all the power to choose life.

I see God at work in Rachel, but I also see God working in ways like Rachel's. Rachel lived in the midst of *family division*, of broken and breaking relationships. Yet she chose to get involved with the Romanian convoys. In getting involved, she *discovered her neighbours*. In doing this, *she acted for life beyond her life*.

In the following reflection on Deuteronomy's command to choose life I want to explore the parallels between how Rachel acted and how God acts.

Family division

Deuteronomy puts us in the context of the covenant. It is a covenant that signifies God's deep affection for his people and also his far-reaching expectations of them.

The covenant revealed God's choice of Israel. It showed how each was surrounded by the other's love. God's love encircled Israel and Israel's love reached out to God. It was a covenant for the life of Israel, but also for the life of the world. The covenant gave God and Israel a symbol that would hold each to their commitment, giving rise to a way of life that through Israel would draw others to the life of God. It would encourage each in the missionary purpose of God's involvement with creation. In this mutuality of love, expectation and mission, life could grow.

So much for theory.

In practice, we see the painful splintering of these relationships and the throttling of the life God intends, as religious structures try to control the providence of God. We see it in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, for this is a practice Christianity has continued in its covenantal relationship with God and the world.

There are many facets of these splintering relationships between God and his peoples. There is the confusion of election with preferment and superiority. Israel and the church have had trouble maintaining a distinctive yet inclusive sense of ourselves in the context of the wider world and its peoples and ways of life. God's people have given in to the temptation to see ourselves as the one true faith, with no need of others save to convert them or displace them.

Tribal peoples have bred a theology of a tribal God. We have divided God's family and baptized our sectarian inclinations as holy writ. We join Ezra and build walls to keep others out and to keep God in. Yet the God of Ezekiel (Ezek 12) and the God of Cornelius (Acts 10) is not to be contained by walls.

Much room is devoted in our biblical story to keeping God's people "pure", ie separated. Take Ezra's clear instruction that all those who had taken non-Jewish wives are to divorce them and eject them from their family. Is this really to choose life?

The lesson of this vulnerable woman, Rachel, is that to choose life is to enlarge one's vision of family, not to reduce it. Our world and our faith are still faced with tribal ideologies and hatreds. Ezra's seductive plea for purity is still at work in the church, whether in its weakness in the global north or in its strength in the global south.

Will God's way of life be frustrated by our broken relationships? Will God choose life or death for us? Hosea 11.1-9 captures eloquently God's conflicting emotions when God felt close to destroying his people, to choosing death for the northern kingdom of Israel.

Discover neighbours

Rachel's choice for life drew her into a wider community. Neighbours and family were invited and cajoled into this act of love and kindness for yet unknown people in another country.

The dream of God is often wider than the vision of the church. God's choice of life often engages God in a larger community and a wider range of concerns than are shared by the church.

God cannot be trusted to choose the partners and patterns of life we cherish. Did God choose life for his people when he blew their world and family apart and sent them into exile in Babylon? Wasn't this to send Israel to neighbours they had been taught to despise?

The creation narratives in Genesis begin with God's nurturing, moving, troubled, lonely Spirit *brooding* on the waters. To "brood" means both to worry and to wait – to wrestle with life, to wish for life. In the creation narrative the Spirit yearns for life outside herself and thus it is created. This yearning for life is something God places in the heart of creation. Humanity is made to multiply, to bear life, and so is creation. With Paul and Charles Darwin we might say our world groans, pregnant with changing, evolving, ever-new life. And we groan with it too, if we allow ourselves to live in community rather than isolation.

God's choice is to choose the neighbour, to love the neighbour. This seems to be fundamentally how God chooses life in creation and in Christ. It is the way God enters into mission alongside neighbours and partners in struggle and transformation.

This way of choosing challenges the way and the choices of those who follow. Peter has to make room for Cornelius at his table, and at the Lord's table. Jesus' table fellowship already includes women and men, devout and sceptic, poor and rich, traitor and friend. But it takes crucifixion and resurrection and a disturbing vision to make Peter see that life really is different now.

In an Ezran post-resurrection world there would have been no room for Cornelius. Peter would simply have faced the choice of how best to eject this upstart gentile from a community and movement that did not include the stranger in its life.

Had Peter looked to other stories from his Jewish faith he might have been less surprised at the inclusion of Cornelius. Ezra chose to overlook the part the Persian emperor Cyrus played in freeing Israel. Ezra chose to draw a veil over the advice of Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles. Jeremiah sent them a letter (Jer 29.1ff) encouraging them to live in peace with their Babylonian neighbours, praying for them, and living life hopefully, distinctively and positively in this new context as God's people.

Do we need Jesus' story of the good Samaritan to make us uncomfortable again in answering the question, "who is my neighbour?" Paul condemned a Corinthian church that met to celebrate the Lord's supper but in fact profaned it by ignoring the needs and humanity of the poorer neighbours and partners at the table (1 Cor 11.20-22).

Should we look again at what our eucharistic fellowship demands, when every eight seconds a child dies of hunger and many millions exist on a dollar a day? Will God's invitation to love our neighbour, work with our neighbour, live in community with our neighbour, both refresh and reconcile God's *oikoumene*? Or will we baptize anew the boundaries we build around our friends?

Act for life beyond your life

Rachel broke free of the forces that might have kept her self-centred and passive. Instead she chose an active identification with the family she "adopted". It was another facet of a life lived for others, expressed initially in care and concern. But God's particular gift is to will change as well as comfort.

In Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones, the bones are not just stuck back together. They are given life. Isaiah sees a wilderness with a highway not for logging trucks or armoured personnel carriers, but along which refugees may return home, witnessing the wilderness in flower.

This "aliveness" comes both from the present life we share and the future life we anticipate. To live only for the present is to deny the need for change, to live only for the future is to deny the urgency of change.

The 24th general council brings together life, need and urgency. Christ's body is hurting as his sisters and brothers are ground down by the injustices of international trade. Christ's body is hurting as his creation is degraded, polluted and plundered. This hurt challenges God to pour out yet more life, to pursue further and more determinedly his life-giving mission. It is again the stress God feels through and for his creation, his family. Once more God faces the choice to abandon us to death or to incite us to life.

God turns to his family and his neighbours, people we may be part of, people we may yet meet, people we may never have considered. And God turns away from people who claim to serve him, yet do not recognize him in the world around them, the need around them, the urgency around them. But God turns always to the tasks of mission.

God's mission draws us into his life, his lifelong struggle for justice and wholeness for peoples and planet. It invites us to a fusion of spirit and practice, to a life fired by passion and found in passionate commitment to transforming the face of the earth.

If we live such a life, then our communion is with all the hurting and the hopeful of our world. If we live an Ezran life, we will want to control life. We will want to turn only to our walls and to our clan, the elect we have baptized in God's name.

But walls hide us away from the world that is our true home and clan loyalties sever the ties with the others that make us fully human and alive. We are called by a servant Christ to seek a vulnerable way of life, a way of life characterized by self-emptying. And this way of life asks us if the powerful can ever give life in all its fullness. Will it only ever come through sacrifice?

God's choices seem always most perplexing to his own people. God sees in Israel a chosen people, yet God turns also to Egypt, Assyria and Babylon as partners in his transforming mission. Jesus comes into the midst of a faithful religious elite, yet still seeks out and includes outcasts and foreigners to signify the transformation he brings.

Choosing life is not choosing life in our own image or interests, but choosing life in God's image and interests. Thus it is to choose a self-giving, self-emptying life centred on the strains of our world, strains which when met with our neighbours can be the ground for new, rich and diverse life to grow.

Questions

1. Do you know people like Rachel? In what ways are you like Rachel?
2. What visions do we have for the life God seeks for our world and planet? What would it mean to choose such a life? Would it mean choosing against anything or anyone?
3. Who are the neighbours to whom we need to turn to bring new life? Are they only church people?
4. Crippling economic injustices are the source of great family division in the world and in the Alliance family. How can we respond to each other?