

Dear Friends,

I was intrigued recently by a comment made by Rishi Sunak, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, who said that *we rarely get to choose the things that define us. What we do choose is our response to situations beyond our control.* I think those are such wise words. It reminded me of a great illustration used by Pastor Rick Warren, about the cards that life deals us. Each of us gets a hand of cards when we start out in this life. The cards represent environment, upbringing, physical and mental attributes etc. The key thing is not to allow these cards to totally define who we are and what we become. There is a trump card in the pack that can change our destiny. This is God's gift of freewill. We can make choices. Our choices may well be limited, whatever our position in society. It is when we creatively, responsibly, and intentionally exercise choice, within the options available to us, that we define our own personality and our legacy. This requires maturity and accountability.

A pundit wrote a humorous article recently stating that he was confused whether the Government wanted him to eat less (for his health) or more (for the economy). I guess it is easy to take a cheap shot at those who carry the heavy burden of leadership in difficult and unprecedented times. However, once again it is our choice whether to avail ourselves of midweek restaurant deals or stay cocooned at home, and the right choice for one person may not be the best choice for someone else.

During this lockdown, my attention has been repeatedly drawn to the first letter of Peter. There are some great spiritual treasures in this little New Testament book. It is addressed to "*God's chosen strangers in the world*" (1 Peter 1:1 CEB) with the prayer "*May God's grace and peace be multiplied to you*" (verse 2). The Christians to whom he wrote had chosen to throw in their lot with Jesus Christ, to be followers of the crucified and risen Lord. That meant that many other people did not understand them. They became strangers in their own homeland, just as *Jesus came to His own, but His own received Him not.* Christ became a stranger and an outcast in the world that He helped Father God to create.

I have heard many interviews and read many articles recently in which representatives of the arts and the business world have spoken about the new landscape in which we find ourselves. Perhaps at the start of lockdown we fondly believed that there would be a quick fix to the

pandemic. We thank God that in the UK things are currently going in the right direction, without for a moment minimising the suffering and grief and stress experienced by so many people. Someone who subscribes to the New York Times has told me that in that city there has been a major resurgence of cases of Covid-19 and some outbreaks have been directly associated with churches. This reminded me that as Christians we have a special duty to watch over one another in love, to follow sound advice and be careful not to expose ourselves or others to unnecessary risks. We have choices to make in the knowledge that choices have consequences. We are therefore responsible for the choices we make. Indeed, as Rishi commented, the choices we make concerning circumstances we did not choose are what defines us.

The cultural life, educational environment and business life of Britain has shifted markedly. Similarly, the church landscape has inevitably altered, and will remain altered until an effective vaccination is readily available. We rejoice in the new opportunities of online worship. This is church, but not as most of us have known it. We will learn in due course to make appropriate adjustments so as to be able to resume some kind of socially distanced gathering for worship. Sadly, this will be with no singing, handshaking, shared hymn books, passing the collection plate or the customary cup of tea after the service. It will be church – but again, not as we know it. For some people, the preferable option will be the comparative freedom of online worship where we can have a cup of tea and sing along to hymns with enthusiasm. Once again, there are personal and corporate informed choices to be made.

As we contemplate the post Covid-19 world we may like Shakespeare's Miranda exclaim, "O brave new world" (The Tempest Act 5 Scene 1). Indeed, we may feel like strangers in this new world. However, never forget that we are "*God's chosen strangers*" and you can experience "*God's grace and peace ... multiplied to you*". May we be defined by our choices, but also by God's grace.

Best wishes to you all,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.