

## Homily for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (July 12<sup>th</sup> 2009)

Those of you who have been to a wedding conducted by me will know that one of the things I sometimes talk about on such occasions is the idea of being chosen. When a couple stand in the church and make their vows, in effect what they are doing is saying to one another that at the deepest level I choose to reject all the other possible ways of life, all the other people that I could marry, all the other ways of life that mean marrying no-one. I choose to reject these, and I choose you. I go on to explain that this looks, on the surface, to be very restrictive: I am shutting down millions of possible ways of life, and limiting myself to just one. However, it is only when we cut loose all the other possibilities and make a once for all irrevocable choice that we can begin to enter a relationship with another at real depth. Once we know we are committed to each other for ever we can begin to dare to reveal our true selves, our deepest hopes and fears and longings. The fact is that being chosen is a profoundly liberating thing. To know that someone else has chosen me rather than all the other possibilities is very empowering. It means that I know I am valued; it means that, because someone else has committed themselves to sharing my life, I can dare to take risks, to do difficult things, to pursue dreams and hopes that, alone, I may never have dared to follow. This is the deepest and the highest nature of the married calling: to live as one who has been chosen, as well as living as one who has chosen another.

The idea of being chosen is also deeply embedded in our christian life. The Jewish people from whom our faith springs were told in the book of Deuteronomy 'of all the peoples on earth, you have been chosen by the Lord your God to be his own people' (Dt. 7.6). God chose the people of Israel to bring forth a Saviour, and with the coming of Christ he chose the Church to present that saviour to the world. St. Peter writes in his first letter 'You are a chosen race' (1 Pet. 2.9). Today's second reading, from the letter to the Ephesians, uses the word chose/chosen four times:

"Before the world was made [God] chose us, chose us in Christ...  
we were claimed as God's own, chosen from the beginning...  
chosen to be, for his greater glory, the people who would put their hopes in Christ..."

So we can say, with great thankfulness, that we have been chosen by God. All that I said earlier about the liberating power of being chosen in marriage applies here, too. In fact the relationship between Christ and the church is often described as being like a marriage relationship; the Church is the Bride of Christ, chosen by him to share his future unconditionally, chosen to be a part of his life in perpetuity. As the people of God we have been chosen, so we are never alone, never having to create our own future on our own. Whatever we do, so long as it finds a place within authentic human living, life as its creator designed it to be lived, we do with God at our side. It was this realisation that drove the saints in earlier ages, and those as yet unknown in our own age, to do extraordinary things for God: to set out for unknown places to found new churches; to discard wealth and power in favour of poverty and solitude; to risk life and limb in service of the poor. It was this sense of being chosen, and thus empowered, that allowed Abraham to leave behind all that he knew, and to set off in service of God, even at a great age (Gn. 12.1ff). It was precisely the same sense of having been called, and thus given strength and courage, that enabled Amos, in our

first reading, to stand up to Amaziah who was trying to silence him: 'we want no prophesying here', said Amaziah, but Amos took his life in his hands and refused to be silenced, because he knew he was chosen to do this.

There is no doubt that to have been chosen is a source of great power, and great strength and confidence. But there are still questions to be answered here. It may well feel great to have been chosen, but what about the people who haven't been chosen? Doesn't this whole idea of being God's chosen people lead to a certain arrogance, a feeling of superiority? In the first place the choice that God makes is not an exclusive one. As limited beings, we humans have only just so much to give: if I choose you, I cannot choose someone else as well without detracting from what I give to you; but this is not true of God, who is limitless. So when he chooses me, he takes nothing away from me when he chooses you as well, and it is his will and desire that all humanity become a part of his chosen people. Furthermore, we have to understand *why* God has chosen us. We have not been chosen simply to make us feel good. St Peter writes '*You are a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God*' (1 Pet 2.9); we are chosen so that we can give glory to God. The Letter to the Ephesians that we heard read today makes exactly the same point: we are '*chosen to be, for his greater glory, the people who would put their hopes in Christ*'. We have not been chosen to make us feel good, we have been chosen to give glory to God. The chosen people is chosen so that it can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5.13-16; CCC para. 782). We are chosen so that we can be of benefit to other people. We are chosen not so that we feel superior and successful, but so that we can take up the role that Christ fulfilled, the role of bringing life and light to the world. We have been chosen to give glory to God, and as St. Irenaeus once wonderfully said 'The glory of God is a person fully alive' we can say that we have been chosen, individually and collectively, to help people live life in all its fullness. That is what we are here for. We come to mass to worship God, to be reminded of all that he has said and done, to re-connect with life as it is truly designed to be lived, be strengthened and empowered by the presence of the Lord, and to be sent out to live with great joy as people who have been chosen, chosen to bring life in all its fullness to the people around us. So, as we celebrate our chosenness, we are called to ask ourselves if our lives are truly life-giving. In my family life, my life at work, at school, with my neighbours and friends, in my hobbies and my relaxation, am I giving life to others? Do my words and my actions help them to live life in all its fullness? Being chosen by God is a great and wonderful source of strength, but it presents us with quite a challenge as well.