Each choice does matter

There is an old story, told by a man named Roberto Assagioli: In medieval times, the age of the construction of many of the great cathedrals, three men were seen chopping stone and they were asked the question, ‘What are you doing?’ The first said, ‘I am chopping stone’. The second said, ‘I am working to earn a living for my family’. The third said, ‘I am building a great cathedral’. What a magnificent response! His humble action he could see as part of a great endeavor - the creation of a beautiful medieval cathedral with all its grandeur and hugeness. His small efforts were lifted up and looked upon as part of this great undertaking that went far beyond himself, his world and indeed his daily work. He would never see the completion of that cathedral, yet he could see that he was part of it and that he was, day by day, contributing to it.

So it is in our own lives. What we do, day by day, contributes to who we are and indeed forms who we are. So too with our thoughts and feelings. As time goes by and we slip into familiar patterns of thinking, responding, feeling, so our self is formed. Who we are is created, day by day, hour by hour, choice by choice. And this leads to some really important considerations. We are all aware of the ‘big decisions’ we make in life and how they can be life-changing and set us off in one direction or another, but those seemingly little choices matter too and they have their part to play in the grand scheme of things. It is in the everydayness of these choices that their power and effect lie. And this happens in a number of ways, for good and for bad. Let’s take the example of telling a lie. While one lie, and let’s suppose it to be undiscovered, may not harm anyone, it can lead to a change within us. Having got away with it once, the tendency may be there to do it again, and again. Perhaps subtly at first, it begins to mould our person and it begins to shape the way we relate to other people. As we slip into patterns of lying, our hearts harden, our moral compass begins to shift and weaken. The way we look at others changes. This is the old ‘slippery-slope’ of course and the change can be insidious, creeping up on us as we make those seemingly little choices each day. We all meet people from time to time whose default answer to how they are is a negative response. Day by day their negative perception of their lot in life becomes deeply embedded and before long, that person is seen not just having a negative response on any given day, but as being a negative person. We need to be like that medieval stone cutter who saw so clearly that each stone he cut contributed to that great cathedral. No one act, choice, thought, response or reaction defines us, but each one does make us ultimately who we are and who we will become.

Jesus, in his interactions with people, shows the significance of each act. As just one example, the story of the woman who was caught in the act of adultery comes to mind. Jesus did not condemn her for her choice on that occasion but he did tell her not to sin again. ‘Don’t let this become a pattern of behavior for you’, he seems to be saying. He set her back on the right path with a vision of her worth and dignity. In all his interactions with ‘sinners’ Jesus was concerned to restore people to a good and healthy way of living. In restoring them to the life they had fallen away from he was pointing to the fact that we are all part of something greater than any one poor choice we make, and we need to see that and let that wisdom be our guide.

The same pattern sets in, of course, for the good we do. Every good choice, action, attitude, thought, feeling, contributes to the creation of goodness. A lifetime of choosing the good will gradually make you a truly good person. The pattern sets in and the choices for good become increasingly natural.
If we are really tuned in to the significance of each attitude we hold, word we speak, choice we make, what might that mean for each of us if, as we awaken and get out of bed each morning, we remembered that? How might I choose to live this day knowing that all I do, think and say, contributes to the person I am today, and the person I am becoming. And how do we ensure that we look upon these choices and actions in this way and not see them as isolated and inconsequential?

Let’s just stay with the cathedral theme for a moment. Have you ever walked into a great cathedral and experienced both a feeling of being so tiny, so small and insignificant and yet, at the same time, found yourself swept up, lifted up, part of something greater? One of those experiences I recall well was when I first visited the great cathedral in Cologne, Germany. The vastness of the space and the sheer magnificence of that grand architecture, sweeping upwards to the heavens, captured me and drew me into a sense of being part of a great story.

The same thing happens when we go outside and gaze into the starry sky. The infinity, the magnificence, take us into a contemplation of the wonder and mystery of the universe of which each of us is a tiny part. We know we are part of something grand, infinite, timeless, stretching beyond us, both past and into the future. Astronauts particularly describe this sense when they look at earth from space.
There are many experiences we can have like this and aren’t they just wonderful moments! What a beautiful release and blessing to see ourselves in this way. There is a great flow of Life, and I am part of it. Each morning there is a sunrise, and I am blessed to be part of it. There is a change in the seasons, and I am caught up in it, part of it. It is pure gift.

One of the most beautiful exclamations in Scripture which captures this realization is St Paul’s, “In Christ we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). This is our context, Paul is saying. This is the greater reality in which we are immersed. If we keep focused on that we will be led to look upon all our words, our thoughts, our choices, in the light of that reality. And that, if we let it and are attentive to it, will colour all we do. We are part of something that extends beyond us. Here at Loreto, we are part of the tradition of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, stretching back four hundred years to the vision and courageous and innovative work of Mary Ward. We are part of the Christian tradition, going back two thousand years, and even further, in its Jewish origins. And even beyond that, we are the latest ‘moment’ in the great and holy flow of Creation. Just as gazing into the starry night sky is utterly awe-inspiring, so too is this realization. How might we live, day by day, so that this context truly speaks into our lives and informs and shapes who we are each moment?

There is much inspiration and wisdom to guide us in the lives and writings of a group of people who lived a long time ago, the desert mothers and fathers. In Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries of the current era the Christian desert tradition began and flourished. These men and women withdrew themselves from the society of their day. At that time, following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. This brought to an end the period of the persecution of Christians and the extreme witness to commitment to Christ that those early martyrs showed. As a result that radical Gospel call to leave everything and follow Christ, which had been so courageously lived out in the period of persecution, seemed to lose its edge and Christianity now seemed to be ‘watered down’ to a comfortable level of religiosity. It had lost its converting power. These abbas and ammas of the Egyptian desert thus left the wealth, compromise and lukewarm spirituality they felt now existed and chose the solitude, silence and prayer of the desert as the new way of being living witnesses to the crucified and risen Lord. They became in a sense the new martyrs, not witnessing by the spilling of their own blood but by the humble life of manual work, fasting and prayer. Their life was often a painful struggle to find their true identity. They fled a world which said, ‘You are what you have’. They were conscious that not only society but the Church too had become corrupted by this motto. In the desert they were able to slowly, over time, shake themselves free of all the layers of the deceptive self and the illusion of truth which society offered, and reclaim their true self. In the desert, without external distractions, they faced the great ‘I am’, and they faced their own, often messy and tumultuous, response to this.

There is a wealth of stories and sayings that we have from these abbas and ammas of the desert. From them we learn that creating an authentic identity requires a transformation, a long and slow process through which we are shaped. And what will shape us is nothing less than an honest relationship with God.

Here is one of those sayings:

*Abba Poeman said: The nature of water is yielding, and that of a stone is hard. Yet if you hang a bottle filled with water above the stone so that the water drips drop by drop, it will wear a hole in the stone. In the same way...*
way the word of God is tender, and our heart is hard. So when people hear the word of God frequently, their hearts are opened to the fear of God.

What we surround ourselves with has a profound effect upon what we become. What we expose ourselves to will, slowly but surely, work its magic on us for good or bad. Abba Poeman’s saying always reminds me of the words of Mother Gonzaga Barry: ‘Stand in a place where God can be seen’. Often we are not even aware of the influence on us of what we are exposed to. The truth, the wisdom, the attitudes, the conversations and beliefs that we are exposed to day by day, slowly seep into the very pores of our being, and at some level they speak to us when we are called upon to make choices – even if that ‘voice’ we hear is the nagging of our conscience, letting us know we are not making good choices. So much depends on where we choose to place ourselves! Just as those desert fathers and mothers so long ago chose to leave the environment that was not opening up the world of the Divine to them and was not enabling them to respond as they would like to, so we too need to choose what we regularly listen to. This includes things like choosing what conversations we have and what attitudes we regularly foster and share with one another. The more we listen to words of truth and life, surround ourselves with them, the more we speak them and choose them, the more we shun that which is life-denying, the more profound will be our own transformation.

So just what is this great ‘cathedral’ we are building with our choices? In Christian thinking it is the ‘Kingdom of God’. And the Kingdom of God is within us and among us. The Kingdom of God is a self which is open to God, responsive to God’s Word, Jesus, responsive to Jesus’ call to personal transformation by following him and living his great commandment of love. The Kingdom of God is a world of justice, peace, love, a world we create and work towards through our choices. Jesus said: “Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). God’s will is done in the here and now, and it comes to life in the ordinary everyday choices we make. Every choice is like a fork in the road: we can move towards the goodness and love that is God or we can move away from it. No choice, word or thought defines us fully, but each one is a significant part of that journey towards God, towards our own transformation.

There is a lovely Catholic tradition known as the Morning Offering, a prayer said each morning upon rising, offering the day, our work, all that we are and do, to God. What a wonderful way to begin each day, placing all that concerns me, all that makes up my world, my relationships, my work, my needs, be they great or small, in the context of that great flow of Life and Love and inviting God to shape it all. As we offer our all to God each morning we will surely be reminded that today each choice does matter.

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