

4th June 2023, Trinity Sunday – The People of God #1 ‘Chosen’ (Deut 7:7-9, John 15:12-17)

As most of you know, I’m a self-confessed sports nut. I’ve always loved sport – most of all I love playing it, something I greatly miss as my body no longer allows me to do *quite* what I’d like it to do; now I compensate for that by watching as much sport as I can. For me sport has been a great blessing: it’s been more than just the fun of participating, it was also the thing that socialised me as a very shy child: sport gave me friends and confidence and I will always be grateful for that.

However, that’s not everyone’s experience of sport. It tends to be one of those polarising things: there are lots of people who hate it, and not just because it can dominate our TV schedules, replacing other weekly programmes that people look forward to. I think of one of my best friends at college who falls into this category, and initially I couldn’t understand why. I’m rubbish at music, I have no musical ability whatsoever – at school I tried to learn the recorder as a 5-year-old and my class teacher actually advised me to stop, I was that bad. They gave me the chime bar to play at primary school concerts as the one thing I couldn’t mess up, I just had to hit one metal bar. But for all that ineptitude, I love music, I listen to it a lot, I get great joy from it. I even enjoy singing – apart from the enforced solos at baptisms and funerals, but I’ve got used to that. So, why does my friend who isn’t very good at sport hate it so much? Why can’t he just enjoy watching it anyway?

The answer goes back to **the school playground, and his experience of getting picked for sports teams**. Many of you will remember this. An impromptu game begins, two team captains are assigned (or self-assigned if one of them owns the ball and threatens to take it away if they’re not the captain), and then the captains pick the teams, one player at a time. It’s a particularly brutal manifestation of Darwinian evolutionary thinking laid bare: the best players get chosen, and little by little the group lined up against the wall gets smaller and smaller, until you’re left with the kids who can’t play, and *nobody* wants on their team.

And *that* is why my friend hates sport. If like me, you’ve not had the experience of being left till last, you won’t understand how for many people sport is an exercise in ritual humiliation. But my friend was often the last one picked, the kid that nobody wanted, and he never forgot it. He was never chosen, only ever grudgingly tolerated as the last person anyone would want on their team.

Today we begin a major new series on what it means to be the people of God. Over the next 13 – yes 13 – weeks, we’ll unpack this in three different ways. In July, we’ll look at some of the major images we use to describe the church in the New Testament, and what each one has to tell us about our purpose. In August, we look at how the creeds (the statements of faith agreed by the Church in its early years) define what characterises the people of God.

But we begin, in June, with what you might say forms the identity of the people of God through the story of the bible. And I’ve whittled it down to four adjectives: **we are chosen, we are challenged, we are redeemed and we are blessed**. These four descriptions run throughout scripture – in other words, long before the ‘church’ existed – but they remain as true today as ever. Over the last couple of years, we’ve welcomed a lot of people into our worshipping community – first online and also now in person, too. So, it seems to be exactly the right time to be thinking about what it means for us to be the people of God: not just as they have been throughout history, but *here and now*, in this season.

And we start today with the foundational idea that **God's people are chosen**. And what is immediately different about the people of God – to return to the playground for a moment – is that when God picks his team he doesn't go for what seems to be the best or strongest player, but quite the opposite, he picks the player that would normally be chosen last – as Moses tells the people quite bluntly in his great sermon which forms the book of Deuteronomy: (v7) 'The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.'

Or to put it another way: my friend would be the first pick on God's team! God isn't seduced by glamour or strength or appearances. God chose the littlest, most insignificant nation on earth to be his people. And isn't that good news for us, too? You don't have to impress God by being the smartest or the fittest or the most beautiful or the hardest working or the wealthiest or the most talented. **God chooses you because he loves you. Simple as that. End of story.**

And God doesn't need to explain why he loves you: just as we love a new-born baby simply because they *are* – even though they all cry and look like Winston Churchill and can't do anything to make us love them – so God loves us, and chooses us.

As an aside, let's not get hung up on this thought: 'well, if God chooses us, if God chooses me, does that mean he doesn't choose someone else.' It doesn't work like that. No-one can say: I can't be part of God's people because God did not choose me. We can simply reach up in loving wonder towards God and say: thank you that you chose me, before I chose you.

Which, as it happens, is also the point that Jesus makes in our gospel reading. Yes, at some level we choose God, in the sense that we respond to his call. But **God chooses us first. He takes the initiative: he always has.** It is God who looks for Adam and Eve in the garden, not the other way round. It is God who finds an unknown bloke called Abraham and tells him to go to Canaan and start a family. It is God who finds Moses in exile in the middle of nowhere and grabs his attention with a burning bush that doesn't burn. It is God who parts the Red Sea to rescue his people from Pharaoh and then comes down to Mount Sinai to give Moses the law.

And so this same Moses can reassure the people that if God chose them he will keep on choosing them, keep on taking the initiative to meet with them and bless them because he keeps his oath (v8) and is always faithful (v9), even to a thousand generations. And just for the record, we're at about 110-150 generations at this moment in 2023, so that promise has a long way left to run!

So, we can rely on God's choice – he's not going to unpick his team or decide on a last-minute substitution. But there is a final sting in the tail, because **whilst God's love and his choice are unconditional, there is a purpose to it.** 'I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit,' Jesus says, 'fruit that will last.' (v16) We are to make the most of this privileged position of choice, showing the love of Christ to the world, loving as Jesus has loved us: unconditionally, consistently, selflessly.

For the people of God to be chosen, means also that we have a role in the world. It's a role we've not always done well: but it remains our purpose, today as always. The faithful Lord of love sends us out to show that love to the world. As God's chosen people, will you heed that call?