

I didn't always want to be a minister. My first choice of career was to be an engine driver. But there were not many openings for 5 year olds in the engine driving business. Of course there were other options too. Belly dancer - which at least would have been more interesting to a wee lad than being a ballet dancer!

The years passed. And so it was that the son of a Presbyterian Church of Scotland minister would one day kneel in St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh and be called to preach the gospel. I don't remember much about the service except that the Presbytery of Edinburgh gave me a Bible. I was going to mention that I already had one, but then I realized it was free and in Scotland if something is *free* you never turn it down!

More than a century earlier Sir Walter Scott was growing up in Edinburgh. His over-riding ambition was to be a poet. He worked hard at his art. But the stage was already too crowded. There was Byron. "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold/ And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold/And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea/When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee". There was Tennyson. "Forward the Light Brigade/ Was there a man dismayed/ Not though the soldier knew/ Someone had blundered// Theirs not to make reply/ Theirs not to reason why/Theirs but to do and die/ Into the valley of death/ Rode the six hundred". The young man couldn't compete with such masters of the craft.

Broken in spirit Walter Scott was forced to turn to prose rather than verse. But in the end classics like "Rob Roy" and "Ivanhoe" set him among the greatest literary figures of his time. But prose was his second choice in life.

Or let's turn to the New Testament. Paul was a difficult man and no one could work with him. Yet, oddly he devoted his life to being the spokesman for a man called Jesus whom he had never met, whose family he ignored and whose disciples he didn't much like. *Jesus*. Jesus who grew up in Galilee, bandit country, and whose ministry was largely in the little fishing villages on the shores of Lake Galilee. He wasn't a national figure at all. They had never heard of him in the capital city. Indeed in *any* city. Paul would preach about this Jesus who was an observant Jew, and then go on to found a new religion which to this very day is almost entirely Gentile. It quickly became the most anti-Semitic of all world religions. Paul was a little bald-headed man who wasn't much of a preacher, but he loved to travel. He tells us about a great disappointment that came to him. He wanted to go to Bithynia near Constantinople, but the Spirit would not let him. So his second choice was Troas. He didn't even want to be there. It would be his second choice.

All around us are stories written in a way that few would have chosen. Do you remember the stories which we were always writing in our heads about how life would be? From the infant days of "I'm the king of the castle" through the wistful years of "Someday my prince will come" we all sketched our autobiographies, stories full of optimism and splendid deeds, the mighty pilgrimage and the crown of glory that fadeth not away. But the reality has so often been different.

Here is a young student at Law School and he dreams of a seat one day on the Supreme Court. But good jobs are hard to come by and he ends up in a nondescript office. And it is not even very enjoyable work. Life's second choices!

Here is a young woman and she dreams of a career on Broadway, but she never gets beyond bit pieces in a local theatre, and waiting on tables to keep body and soul together. Life's second choices!

Or here is a quiet soul longing for someone strong and true who will scatter the primal loneliness of the human heart. But Mr. Right never comes along and when he does he turns out to be Mr. Wrong. Life's second choices!

Sooner or later we all discover that a great deal of living has to be worked out painfully on the basis of second choices. There are circumstances we would never have chosen, temperament we would never have requested, and ground rules we were never equal to. But here is the astonishing thing. The Bible says that it was the *Spirit* who would not allow Paul to enter Bithynia. What if it is God who will not allow us to build our lives on ideal sites, with faultless materials and carefree spirits? What if the shadows be God's gift to us as well as the morning light?

And I find this theme of second choices lavishly illustrated in the Bible.

Here is a young man called Jacob who planned to get to the top. As the younger son he had the right to stay at home and enjoy all the benefits of the family homestead. But that wasn't the way life worked out for him. Some of it was his own fault. During the most formative years of his life, the years when he had to make decisions about his

marriage and his faith he was far away from those who could have guided him. He was a cowhand for Laban his scheming uncle.

Here is another young man called Joseph. He dreamed that the sun and the moon and the whole universe would fall down before him, and it would all happen without any great effort on his part. We've known teenagers like that. So he flounced around in that ridiculous coat of many colours - a kind of academic robe on a cattle farm - can you believe it!! - and in the end he got jumped and went hobbling off to Egypt at the north end of a camel going south. There was worse to come. He ended up with Mrs. Potiphar who was a firm believer in "love you neighbour but don't get caught". Much of the first part of his life was a choice, but it was very much a second choice.

And the supreme example in the Bible of life's second choices was that of our Lord himself. See him as a refugee baby in Bethlehem, orphaned at an early age when he needed security, carrying the stigma of dubious parentage and the public insult of being called "Son of Mary". No Jewish boy was ever called after his mother. Jesus, whose passionate temperament *caused* problems as well as solving them - Jesus, whose choices caused one man to take his own life and another to weep bitterly. He wasn't God walking around in sandals. He was a man who believed that God's kingdom was just about to appear. He was so sure that he could say that he would not drink another glass of wine until the kingdom had come - it was only hours away. Wine was the sign of the messianic age. What actually happened shocked him totally. How could he be arrested in Gethsemane by the temple police when he had been teaching openly in the Temple just a few days before? How could he be lumped in with two freedom fighters when he was not part of the resistance movement at all? How could he be forsaken when he trusted so totally that God would be faithful in the hour of trial? His life and his death were for him life's second choices.

Life's second choices! Sometime they are the result of our own personality - a physical ailment, a restrictive childhood, an innate insecurity, a fear that we can't measure up, something within ourselves that really screws things up time and time again. And of course choices that others have made which boxed us in. And then sheer accidents of time and place which no one in particular seemed to make. If only the Spirit had not given us Troas but Bithynia. But here is the remarkable fact that it was in the place of second choice that Paul rendered his most remarkable service. Troas was the gateway to Asia, the place where he made his first convert in a new continent, the start of some of the finest Christian communities in places like Philippi and Thessalonica. And Paul did it with the bits and pieces, the leftovers of broken plans.

Let me finish with this thought. A lot of popular evangelical religion today seems to take us away from the reality of living in a tough world. Jesus becomes the escape from pain and loss, from limitations and question marks. A Jesus religion which replaces goodness with happiness, struggle with certainty, travail with feeling good. It is "Jesus-religion" but it is not the religion of Jesus. God cares too much about the fashioning of our lives to give us sedatives in place of discipleship. It is the *Spirit* who leads us to Troas.

So accept your Troas, whatever it is - regrets from the past, or uncertainties about the future, some debilitating thing in your mental or physical make up, choices that closed some doors which you now wish had been left open, people who make life miserable and bosses who make work unhappy - things you just can't change. Accept the fact that you are a naturally anxious person, often insecure and frequently frightened. This is the raw material out of which God's kingdom is hewn.

I started off with Walter Scott. Let me finish with C.S. Lewis who was a pupil at the school I attended. He was born with only one joint in his thumb. So he was manually very clumsy. He wrote: "I longed to make things....ships, houses,only to turn away from my hopeless failures in tears. As a last resort I was driven to write children's stories instead. But you can do more with a castle in a child's story than with the best cardboard castle you ever made that now stands on a nursery table".

Yes. You can! You can! Don't you see that your second choice may be God's first.