

Choosing to Run
National Service of Praise and Thanksgiving
50th Anniversary of Jamaican Independence
Saturday 21 July 2012

It doesn't happen to any of us all the time. But eventually it comes to all of us at some time. It's that defining moment when the luxury of procrastination runs out, we are caught in a cul de sac and our circumstances puts a gun to our head. And we have no other option. We have to make a choice.

But it's not the best way to choose. Forced choices are like shotgun weddings. They cast a quiet cloud over the event and spoil the glamour of the occasion.

Because choice is the highest pinnacle of human dignity.

"Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing," said Viktor Frankl, "the last of the human freedom -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances...." And he should know: Victor Frankl, a world renowned psycho therapist survived Hitler's concentration camps.

So the powerful text we have just heard from the book of Deuteronomy can seem like a shotgun contract. A no option clause: You have life and death. Chose life and live! Or else!

It reminds me of a desperate midnight journey in Nigeria some years ago. Our small party had to get to our destination in order to catch a return flight before a military curfew the following day. As we approached a bridge we were greeted by an ominous road sign. It said, "We bear no responsibility for your safety. Cross at your own risk." There were no barriers or blockades to stop us using the bridge. When I asked my hosts why we didn't choose another bridge he said there wasn't another one. This was the only bridge for at least 30 miles.

This bible text is not about that.

Choice is a sacred human enterprise. It changes us and it changes our futures.

In 1865 a black Baptist leader in Morant Bay chose to be free and things changed in Jamaica. In 1955 a woman in Montgomery Alabama decided not to give up her seat to a white person on a bus and everything began to change in America.

It's not always dramatic but the change is in the choice. As the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre once said, "you become what you chose." In our homes, our professions and our politics, choice brings change. And it's also true on the track. In a finely tuned athlete the difference between gold and silver may be in the mind.

There's more to Jamaican athletes than yam and dashine, salt fish and green bananas: it's the choice to be the best. It's the decision to run to win. It's that irrepressible 'Jamaicaness' which has made our big-small island a household name from Toronto to Timbuktu; from New York to Nairobi. It's the choice not to be beaten, beaten up, or beaten down. And it comes with the confidence, which most Jamaicans seem to possess. You will often hear it in our barber-shop politics. It's the confidence to brag about things we know about, and to brag about things we don't know anything about.

As the saying goes: you can always tell a Jamaican but you can't tell him anything.

I suppose if the apostle Paul wasn't a Jew he would have been a Jamaican because he understood this choice to run. "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

So it's a clear equation: no pressing, no prize. And at fifty you're old enough to know that.

And so at fifty Jamaicans at home and abroad have important choices to make. And our choices will have huge implications for the future. These choices about the way we run will have an impact on our children and our children's children.

Our choices must touch the issues of private and public life. Of probity and politics. In the brave new world of the 21st century we have tough and contemporary moral choices to make: choices

about human rights and our constitutional relationship with the Commonwealth.

Our imploding economy, the education of our children and the unacceptable crime rates are all shouting out for decisions.

At fifty it is possible to be proud of your past and yet pensive about your future. And so here we stand like the people of a new Israel in the book of Deuteronomy: ex-slaves. A lot going for us and experimenting with the responsibilities of freedom.

As Rev Eric Brown reminds us in his greeting, like all democracies with a dream, the great dream of our founding fathers is still a work in progress.

Jamaica 'land we love' overflows with giftedness and great people. From the modest storehouse of our island nation we have opened our hands to bless the world of arts and music, sports, politics and business.

And Reggae Reggae sauce!

But Jamaica with all its possibilities and potential is an unfinished symphony. In this jubilee year, there is a sense in which, we like Paul, must forget those things that are behind and press for an even greater prize as we claim our place at the table of prosperous nations in the world.

So today our history summons us to choose how we will run. And it calls us to remember a very important fact. And it's this: In the 1960s, an age of independence when many people doubted God and nations were casting off religious restraint, Jamaica was clear in its choice. Jamaica defied the cultural tide, gave its allegiance to God and forged its very identity as a nation in the crucible of faith in God.

It seems that we understood what Moses meant when he told the people, "hold fast to him, For the Lord is your life..."

When others turned their backs on him, we made God the anthem of our hopes.

Eternal Father bless our land
Guard us with Thy mighty hand,
Keep us free from evil powers,
Be our Light through countless hours

There's something very sobering about becoming fifty. A person who has lived half a century becomes even more sensitive about time. As someone put it, "middle age is later than you think, and comes sooner than you expected."

Admittedly it's also possible to become fatalistic about age. As another modern proverb says, "After fifty everything that doesn't hurt doesn't work."

But Jamaica has no need for fatalism. At fifty we are better positioned to make better choices about a better future. What is needed is greater collaboration from our politicians, businesses and spiritual leaders which demonstrate that we can work harmoniously together because we have come of age.

Our choices today may lead us to new and radical departures. They may revise and reject the foundations we laid in August 1962. A nation has the right to do that. And in this scenario we may continue a form of godliness and deny his power. We may open our public meetings in prayer and fail to apply our prayers to our public policies and private lives.

That is also a choice.

Or we may choose to stay on the track. To run fast and faithful. To receive the baton from our fore fathers who put their faith in God. And run to win.

God bless Jamaica and all her peoples at home and abroad.

Rev Joel Edwards