

*'Today I set before you life and death, blessing and curse  
Choose life that you and your people may live and be free.'* Deut 30

When I was in seminary, training to be a priest, the week of the college retreat was one of the most popular weeks of the college year.

It wasn't that we were a particularly holy bunch of trainee ministers – ordinands desperate to spend hours on our knees in the chapel – which made being on retreat so attractive, so much as having a week off lectures,  
catch up on overdue essays  
take a daily siesta  
and, when we had run out of every other way of avoiding getting holy,  
give our rooms a spring clean.

But one year the retreat director put all that to a stop when in his opening talk he handed out pens and paper and asked us to write our own obituaries – the short summary of our lives – that would appear in the local press after we had died.

As a bunch of 20 something year olds in our prime it seemed a daft thing to be asking us to do but it was fascinating what came out of it.

Some of my peers were going to lead Scotland into victory at Hampden,  
several would marry beautiful women and have large families,  
one would invent a cure for cancer,  
and another was going to sail around the world  
after retiring as a very wealthy man at 50.

Not bad for a bunch of trainee Roman Catholic priests  
who would never earn a salary,  
be forbidden to marry and  
never travel further than Dumbarton or Clydebank!

But amidst the laughter  
and the competition to see who would lead the most exotic life,  
it soon became clear that what we were actually being asked to do  
(in writing our obituaries)  
was to choose how our lives would unfold  
and then – having made those decisions –  
to knuckle down and turn those choices into realities.

Obviously none of us could control the time or the circumstances of our deaths, but if our obituaries were going to say

that we had lived cheerfully,  
with never a bad word to say against anybody,  
that we had been real friends to those who were sick or in need,

then we had better stop being so crabbit,  
start guarding our tongues  
and look out for others now while we had the chance.

The retreat director was very wise.

And what he was putting before us was the very challenge of these verses from Deuteronomy 30

*'Today I set before you life and death, blessing and curse  
Choose life that you and your people may live and be free.'*

It's so easy right now to drown in stories about those who are choosing death over life

- Stories about world leaders resorting to bullying tactics and hammering yet more nails into the coffin of free speech and democracy
- Stories about people building visible and invisible walls that will keep us and our cronies living in comfort while leaving those on the other side abandoned without basic necessities
- Stories that trade in fear rather than in love.

*'Today I set before you life and death, blessing and curse.  
Choose life that you and your people may live and be free.'*

So what will your obituary say?

That you chose life, or you chose death?

That you put yourself first, made yourself number one?

Or that you found your life by bringing others back to life?

True holiness has little to do with being on retreat.

True holiness has little to do with even coming to church.

True holiness is about taking people down from the crosses

To which life has pinned them

And lending a shoulder

To help roll away the stone from all that prevents them from rising from the dead.

And so, whether you are in your 20s, your 50s, or your 80s,

Why not have a go at writing your own obituary,

imagining what you would like to be remembered for after you die

and then, start living that way,

not tomorrow, not when you can get round to it,

but right here, right now, today.

After all, why wait till your life is over to start rising from the dead

when you can be the living proof to others

that Resurrection – a fresh start – a whole new way of living

can begin right here, right now?

And if you do, then you will have fulfilled the Scripture:

*'See today, I set before you life and death, blessing and curse.  
Choose life that you and your household may live and be free.'*

Michael Paterson