

Silent Reflections
Tuesday 25 June 2024:

‘The Road Not Taken’



*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

(from a poem by Robert Frost)

Introduction

The Straight Road

We commonly view our life on earth as a road that we are travelling along. In terms of our spiritual life, too, we talk of our faith journey. We may visualise this as a straight path, along which we should keep moving without any deviations, as in this advice given in Proverbs 4: 25-27:

*Let your eyes look directly forwards,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;*

Likewise in Matthew's Gospel (7:13-14), we are familiar with these words:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Staging posts

Along this road there may be significant encounters with God that become staging posts for us, experiences to look back on when life is particularly tough. In these times of overwhelming pain, distress, illness, doubt, or fear we might recall those times when God was a real presence, when we were held close and felt bathed in love. Such moments can give us hope and be comforting, even as we cry out in our despair and feel alone.

For some of us, our journey of faith has a dramatic beginning like Saul on the road to Damascus, as he recounts his experience to King Agrippa:

"I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." I asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. (Acts 26)

For others, the times of encounter or profound senses of the presence of God are less dramatic, rather as John Wesley recalled, "I felt my heart strangely warmed," but, either way they challenge our way of life. Such moments can be life-changing or they can be ignored; we always have a choice.

Which is the *right* road and do I really want to find it?

Along the way, we may come to places where the road diverges and we have to discern the way forward. We can become paralysed at this point, agonising over which way is *right*. Assuming we desire to keep heading towards God, towards the light, we are anxious to know which is the way God wants us to take and to avoid a path that will lead us astray.

We might experience something of a tussle within our hearts. In the words of song *Pilgrim*, Enya sings:

*One way leads to diamonds
One way leads to gold
Another leads you only
To everything you're told*

*In your heart you wonder
Which of these is true
The road that leads to nowhere
The road that leads to you*

In our vulnerability, we are often torn between wanting to please God and wanting to please ourselves and, in our hearts, we might echo this Lenten prayer of Henri Nouwen:

Lord, I want to follow you to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, and to the final victory over death. But, I am still so divided. I truly want to follow you, but I also want to follow my own desires and lend an ear to the voices that speak about prestige, success, human respect, pleasure, power, and influence. Help me to become deaf to these voices and more attentive to your voices, which calls me to choose the narrow road to life...I know it is going to be very hard for me. The choice for your way has to be made every moment of my life. I have to choose thoughts that are your thoughts, words that are your words, and actions that are your actions. There are no times or places without choices. And I know how deeply I resist choosing you.

Crossroads

Sometimes the decisions are even more complicated with more than two choices; we come to a crossroad where many paths diverge. Jeremiah (6:16) had the unenviable task of relaying God's message to people who refused to listen. He told them: *Thus says the Lord:*



*Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.*

Those of us who regularly walk the labyrinth are used to its twists and turns and feel at times we are heading in the wrong direction, or that we will never arrive at our destination. But we soon realise that this is an illusion; there are no dead-ends and, if we persevere, we will eventually come to the centre. This is more often how we feel about our journey through life, perhaps, as J.R.R. Tolkien expresses it in *The Fellowship of the Ring*

*The Road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.*

We do have a kind of map in the Bible and in our talks with God, but as Bruce Cockburn sings in *Pacing the Cage*:

*Sometimes the best map will not guide you
You can't see what's round the bend,
Sometimes the road leads through dark places
Sometimes the darkness is your friend.*



We know from reading John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that not all the hazards he faced on the way were of his own making. He found the slough of despond in his path and the hill of difficulty could not be avoided.

Choices made between an obvious good path and a destructive one are easy to discern. Harder are those between two 'goods', and, sadly, we sometimes feel we have to plump for the lesser of two evils.

Freedom to choose

The longer I live, it seems to me that God has always wanted me to join in the decision making. There is no restricted blueprint for my life that I deviate from at my peril. As long as I am travelling towards the light, God delights in the variety of ways I have chosen of reaching my destination. Likewise, I should not expect other people to travel on exactly the same paths that I have chosen. Indeed, Ignatius of Loyola warns us:

It is dangerous to make everyone go forward by the same road, and worse to measure others by yourself.

Turning back

At times we do find ourselves travelling away from the light, as seemingly Cleopas and his companion did on the road to Emmaus, and we have to turn around if we want to continue to be a disciple when Jesus confronts us. After their encounter with the risen Christ, they make a U turn:

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sometimes God challenges us as he did Elijah in 2 Kings 19 "What are you doing here Elijah?" Might God be asking us about our current situation, "What are you doing here?"

In Edwin Muir's poem *The Way*, he intimates at one point that there is no turning back:

I must retrace the track.
It's lost and gone.
Back, I must travel back!
None goes there, none.

This may be true of our physical life journey, but thankfully it is not true of our spiritual one: Louise Penny writes in her novel *A Great Reckoning*:

There is always a road back. If we have the courage to look for it, and take it. I'm sorry. I was wrong. I don't know. I need help. These are the signposts.

St Ignatius also teaches us that we may have to retrace our steps in order to understand where things began to go awry for us. For example, one wonders if King David had retraced his steps after falling into adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband, he might have recalled that:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him...But David remained at Jerusalem.

At the end of our earthly life, perhaps we will echo the words of Ruth Bidgood in her poem, *Roads*:

*No need to wonder what heron-haunted lake
lay in the other valley,
or regret the songs in the forest
I chose not to traverse.
No need to ask where other roads might have led,
since they led elsewhere;
for nowhere but this here and now
is my true destination.
The river is gentle in the soft evening,
and all the steps of my life have brought me home.*

Some Options:

- Stay with any word or phrase or image that has caused you to pause. Talk with God about its significance for you now. Be open to the Spirit's guiding. Don't be afraid.
- Recall any significant staging posts on your faith journey. Drawing a timeline might help. How have these markers helped you on your journey?
- Walk the labyrinth, or use the finger version (see overleaf).

As you go in, reflect on the roads you have chosen and their consequences. Were there times when you had to make a U turn. How did that come about? How did it feel?

In the centre, pause to reflect on where you are today. What is important? How are you nourishing your faith? How are you loved, encouraged, challenged in the Way?

As you leave, talk to God about all the things you are grateful for and give thanks and praise.

