I wonder how we will look back in a year or maybe two years’ time to this extraordinary few months that we have been living through. We have all had to learn to live with massive change and uncertainty, not to mention fear. How we have coped with that will vary enormously depending on our circumstances, our means, our personalities and also how we understand God to be present in our midst. Going into lockdown was fairly straightforward in terms of understanding what we could and couldn’t do, although for many of us who live with a lot of freedom, that will have been hard as we had to adapt to new ways of doing things and new ways of being in relationship with others. As we come out of lockdown, things are more complex – the rules are not quite as clear and for many, the greater freedom we have been given, gives rise to some fear as to what is safe.

Of course, we live with rules and regulations all the time – in our society, in our workplaces, in groups we belong to and so on but we know what those are and they become part of the way we operate. Within that though, many of us live with a lot of choice available to us and one of the things that Coronavirus has brought sharply into focus is the division in our society and in our world between those who have a lot of choice and privilege and those who do not – and those who do not have that choice about where and how they work or where they live have been those who appear to have suffered more through this pandemic both economically but also in terms of their health.

For our first reading today we heard part of Paul’s letter to the Romans. You will probably be aware that throughout Paul’s letters we see him trying to make sense of the relationship between law and grace. Paul, as you will recall, had been a strict Jew, following all the laws and required ritual and he then had that dramatic conversion that we read about in the Acts of the Apostles. He had been one who was persecuting Christians but he had a powerful encounter with the risen Jesus which completely changed the course of his life. Throughout his New Testament writing we see him wrestling with this conundrum of how to make sense of his Jewish heritage through the lens of his Christian faith – what does it mean to live by grace when you have grown up being steeped in the demands of law?

In the passage that we heard today from Romans – which is quite a complex letter – Paul particularly looks at the whole notion of freedom, slavery and choice. Verse 16 says, ‘Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin which leads to death, or of obedience which leads to righteousness.’ And then he goes on to give thanks that his readers having once been slaves to sin have been set free from this and are now slaves of righteousness.

Now this may not seem the most attractive of propositions. In our 21st century world, many of us value freedom but, of course, this is a mistaken illusion. Think of the choices that we make in our lives and reflect on how easy it is to become slaves to those choices. We become shaped by the choices we make and Paul describes that relationship as slavery. Jane Williams in her commentary on this passage says – many of us in the privileged West, most of the time, treat our choices as ephemeral – after all, we can choose again. Every time we choose in favour of one thing, we choose against another. What we choose today becomes our Master and this makes it harder to choose differently tomorrow.’

We only have to engage in online shopping to discover how easy it is to get caught up in a contractual relationship because we have failed to tick a box on the form which has not been obvious. We think we have opted for something only to find we have become trapped and it is very difficult to get out of.
But, and this is a big but, God chooses us and it is only when we become enslaved to God, as Paul puts it, that we experience the freedom that comes from eternal life in Jesus. When we choose to live in obedience to God, as Paul did, our whole world changes. We see things differently and we have a different perspective on the world in which we live and on our lives. No longer do we see things solely from our own point of view, we see things as a member of the Body of Christ, as His ambassadors and witnesses in the world. And when we live first and foremost in obedience to the love of God, the human choices we make become secondary.

Our choice to follow Jesus and to be obedient to Him not only gives us a sense of security but also affects the way in which we see the plight of others in our society and in our world. It is not an optional extra to care about the suffering of others and the injustice towards them. It is not just for those who have a particular passion to be outraged when a brother or sister is murdered because of their race, their colour or their faith. This is the calling of all Christians who see those who are created by God as worthy of honour and respect and as valued brothers and sisters.

In choosing to follow Jesus, we entrust our lives to Him and pray that He will use us to witness to His love for all people and to be a force for change in our often divided and unjust world. May God give us his strength and his grace as we seek to be obedient to Him and to live out our calling as His disciples in the world.