

I had a quiet afternoon this week with the Carmelites in Penn this week. I was standing by the window, drinking my tea, and I saw a little ladybird climbing up the window.

I opened the window at the bottom - and gently knocked the ladybird down the glass toward the opening. It just set off walking back up toward the top. I did it again - and again it turned its back on the opening and set off up the glass. There was the possibility of freedom there, but either it didn't see it, or it didn't want to take it. It was trapped, not by the window, but by its own choice.

That's not just a description of my ladybird. We can all become trapped by our own choices. We think we're heading for freedom - for a better life - and in fact we're turning our backs on real life and heading into a trap.

During these last weeks in our readings we've heard a lot about the lifestyle choices we make. And the warning that they all give is this - don't be like that ladybird.

There are some striking phrases in today's reading from Paul's letter to Timothy - phrases that cut right across a money obsessed culture. What does a desire for money do to us? It 'plunges us into ruin and destruction'. It 'pierces us with many pains'. It traps us.

The story that Jesus tells about the rich man and Lazarus is another way of saying the same thing. Even when his choices in life have led him into Hades, the rich man is still trapped in his way of thinking. He still thinks that he has the right to make Lazarus bring him some cooling water, or to send him to warn his brothers. He still doesn't get it.

Jesus tells this parable, looking in sadness at the rich Pharisees who love money. They don't realise how they have created this prison for themselves. Even when they are offered the chance of freedom, most of them will end up turning their backs on the offer.

I wonder if there are ways that we end up doing this - making choices that we think are good in our lives, but which end up imprisoning us? How many people feel like joining Freddy Mercury and singing 'I want to break free'?

We might be imprisoned by our attitude to money or our life style. For the people Amos was talking about in our first reading the trap was idleness. For some of us, it's the trap of busyness. Or it might be the day to day choices like the one we were thinking about last week - needing to keep up with the news. Allowing the TV to take over our lives. Letting social media become our master. We don't all use Facebook, or Instagram, or Snapchat, but those who do can find themselves completely trapped in a world of competitive likes and second by second judgments.

We are not all be equally imprisoned by our choices in life. But both the bible and our own experience suggests that we all can become like that ladybird - choosing little prisons of our own when freedom is on offer.

Jesus saw the ways we trap ourselves, but he wanted to show people the possibility of a different choice. The reading we had a few weeks back from Deuteronomy, is a powerful expression of choice. 'I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.'

That's the choice that Jesus offered. To the fishermen of the lake shore he said - 'Follow me' - choose life! To the crowds who came to hear him he said 'Repent' which really means 'make a different choice - choose God's way to live - choose life!' To rich Zacchaeus, up a tree in more ways than one, he said 'Come down, let me into your home and your life, unlock the door of your safe and your heart - choose life'. To us all, every day, and every moment of the day, when we have small choices to make and when we make bigger choices about the attitudes that govern the direction of our lives, he says 'Choose life!'

Some people took up Jesus' offer - often the people who had limited more choices in their lives. Jesus didn't mind - choosing God's gift of life and grace because we have come to the end of our own resources is a good thing.

Other people just couldn't make that choice. The rich young man turned sadly away, and broke Jesus' heart.

Those choices in the gospels are often about complete life changes. But we have small choices like this every day - choices to stay trapped, or to choose freedom.

Do you remember the challenge I set us last week? When you are about to tune into the news media, spend a moment tuning into God instead? I wonder if you've tried it? If you have, how have you got on? I haven't found it easy - but I have found that the more I try the easier it becomes to break the habit. And I think it has helped me to be a little more aware of God with me through the day, and to have space for something which is more life giving.

I've used some of this space to read a book called 'Soulfulness'. It explores the practice of mindfulness, which you may have come across. Mindfulness is about being more present in each moment - not allowing ourselves to drift through life half caught up in anxieties about the past, and half caught up in thoughts about the future. The first chapter is called 'How do you drink your tea?' How often do we drink a cup of tea - or coffee - or have a meal - and not even notice what we are drinking or eating. How often do we miss out on being here, in the present moment?

So I've been trying to learn to be more 'present' - more open to the miracle of each passing moment. And it's not easy! Partly because we so easily get caught up in mental chatter that takes us away from being **here**. And partly because if we allow ourselves to be in the present, it can be uncomfortable - when we stop and just be, we notice 'the noise beneath the noise' - the deeper flow of our feelings - the ones we may be trying to avoid.

So this book is presenting me with a new choice - the choice to sleepwalk through my life, caught up on a mental conveyor belt that never stops, or the choice to opt for 'wakefulness and open-hearted presence', facing up to how I really feel and sharing those feelings with God.

That might seem a very different choice from the earlier ones we were thinking about. But they are connected - because if we want to begin making a choice for life, then we need to learn to be present, and notice where we are, and stop madly walking up to the top of the window. And that won't be easy. The prisons we make in our lives are too familiar and comfortable, and it takes real desire and the humility to ask for God's help if we are going to escape.

May we be given the insight to see in what ways we are imprisoned in our lives - and may we be given the grace to make a different choice, and to find freedom - like my ladybird who, with a little help, finally flew off through

the open window and out into the world. And may we find, more and more, day by day and hour by hour, 'the life that really is life'.