

All life is selective. We may dream, when young, that the world is at our feet or the world is our oyster, waiting to be explored or used in a multitude of ways, all of which remain forever at our service. But then we have to choose and, as we choose, it slowly dawns on us that we don't have complete freedom in this, after all: that each choice narrows the range of further choices and that means that every choice counts, is important, needs discernment. The temptation then becomes to get other people, or circumstances, even, to choose for us and this is at its sharpest in a religious life that believes that obeying a certain set of rules or obligations will bring us to heaven. Do this, and this, and this, and you are saved – and this is at its sharpest in a religious life where certain people arrogate the formulation and interpretation of the 'laws' for the good of the others, and the others – that is, mostly us, the laity, are happy, or rather willing, to let this happen because at a very primitive level we like to be told what to do. In its crudest form it becomes a form of power sharing: we'll let the priests look after the religious bit as long as they can guarantee that turning up on Sundays is sufficient for our souls, and the priests, in their turn, will leave us alone for the rest of the week to get on with our essentially secular lives. This is put much better by Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But Jesus won't leave us alone in this deception, as God in Christ takes personal responsibility for each of us, so we, in our turn, have, in a sense, to take personal responsibility for God – that is to respond to God's call to be fully human, here and now, in the presence of one another, and not to put this off until some idealised version of heaven finally rescues us. Heaven, salvation, in this sense, is now. So the question of whether we're going to sanitise the benches here before we begin our services becomes one of whether we are first going to sanitise our hearts to make sure that our interior disposition is such that we are acting in accord with God's will and not our own or, better, not *only* our own, for ideally, they should coincide. So the recognition, as we grow up, that our choices are increasingly limited is not, in fact, a lessening of our freedom but an introduction into the greater freedom of God. We think we are being further constrained but Jesus is saying, as his disciples are demonstrating here, that there is a greater law at issue which brings God's life, God's heaven, God's eternity, into our own limited, finite, physical world, here and now, and which all other laws also serve if they answer this greater law: what is the most loving thing I can do now, not for myself, but for my neighbour? Which may include sanitising the benches, or not.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour