

[Before I start, I want to say a very big thank you to the choir who have sung so beautifully on over 200 evensongs and other services during my time at Jesus. You have been led by a succession of brilliant organ scholars, not least James and Lottie, with Megan providing skilful support and guidance to you all. I've listened to many sermons over the years, and this is my turn to share with you some of my thoughts about your futures.]

How many of you have ever bought a pair of jeans?

How easy was it to choose?

A few months ago I went in to the kitchen in the Lodgings to find my step-daughter Eliza and her friend Charlie slumped at the kitchen table looking fed-up.

It turned out that they had been out shopping for jeans in town and they'd come back empty handed.

There was not a **single pair** of jeans in Oxford that was just right.

In my naïve way, I thought there was plenty of choice, so I did a quick piece of research.

Five minutes on the web showed that within a few minutes walk of College, five shops: Topshop, Gap, Debenhams, Next and M & S, between them, sell **837** different styles of jeans.

And this is without even looking at Fat Face, White Stuff, Jack Wills, Hobbs, and so on.

For instance, Gap stocks the following styles: true skinny, high rise skinny, slim straight, girlfriend, boyfriend, legging, always skinny, real straight, perfect boot, sexy boot, and curvy boot.

Perhaps Eliza and Charlie couldn't find the right pair because there's simply **too much choice**. They couldn't be sure that there wasn't a slightly better pair somewhere else. They'd never have enough information to be sure that they'd made the right choice.

What about mobile phone tariffs?

Do you know whether or not you've got the best possible deal?

A few years ago, I was told that there were 7 million possible tariff combinations in the UK: If you needed a minute to assess each choice, it would take about 2 years of work to consider all of them.

Faced with so much choice, we can either be paralysed by indecision or do what economists call 'satisficing', that is choosing something that is good enough, without knowing whether or not there could have been something better if only we'd looked a little longer.

So although we live in a world in which, supposedly, choice and the consumer is king, our ability to make the very best choice is probably an illusion.

Businesses that provide us with so-called choice don't make it easy.

40% of people never change their bank even if they are fed up with the service and nearly a third have never switched electricity provider, even though they could probably save money by doing so.

For many of us, the time and effort required are simply too great.

But however difficult and frustrating it is to choose the right pair of jeans, the right mobile phone tariff, the right bank account or the right kind of toothpaste, in the end these are not the choices that really matter in your life.

In American Universities, graduation is called "commencement" because it is the start of your "real life", for which a university education is part of your preparation.

Those of you who are graduating are facing choices about where to live, what kind of jobs you want to do, whether you want to have a family, and what it is that you really value in your life.

An example of a really important choice is the family whose house turned out to be exactly on the border between Poland and Russia when the boundary line was being surveyed.

"Do you want to be in Poland or Russia?" asked the surveyors who were finalising the line.

"Poland" came the unhesitating and instant reply.

"But why Poland?" enquired the surveyors.

"Because we couldn't stand another one of those Russian winters"

Coming back to your choices and your futures.

When I graduated, I more or less drifted into doing a doctorate without much conscious thought, and then more or less automatically into an academic career. I didn't give it much thought. My father was an academic, so perhaps I just assumed that this was the kind of job you do.

But two Oxford philosophy graduates, Ben Todd and Will MacAskill, have set up a Foundation called 80,000 hours, which aims to help students to make a more active choice about their careers. Some of you may have come across it already.

The average person spends 80,000 hours of their life at work, and Ben's and Will's Foundation aims to help people to choose a career that is worthwhile. If you haven't decided what to do with your life, it might be worth a visit to their website

What proportion of that time would be it appropriate to spend on deciding whether or not you are doing a job that is worthwhile?

Would it be reasonable, for instance, for you spent 1% of the time contemplating what to do with the other 99%?

1% is 800 hours.

Talking of jobs reminds me of the Jesus graduate a few years ago, who took a temporary job at the London Zoo.

The star attraction in the Zoo, a friendly gorilla, had just died. The Zoo was desperate for a replacement, and because it takes a while to order up a new gorilla, they'd advertised for someone willing to wear a gorilla costume and pretend to be the real thing.

The Jesus graduate turned out to be brilliant at it. As his confidence grew, he started to swing from branch to branch in the enclosure making loud whoops.

But then disaster struck: he lost his hold on a branch and went flying over the top of the bars into the next enclosure - occupied by a large ferocious male lion.

The graduate panicked at start to scream as the lion approached.

The lion whispered "don't worry, I'm a Jesus graduate pretending to be the lion".

If you are going to think about what constitutes a worthwhile job, you need some kind of reference point to help you make the right choice

This could be simply your intuition, personal preference, your faith, or what your parents and friends do for a living.

Some philosophers have tried to work out from first principles what it means to make the right choice.

For instance, some of you will have come across a branch of moral philosophy called "trolleyology", in which people are asked to make choices about moral dilemmas.

The classic thought experiment is this: You are standing by the railway track and you see a train rushing towards 5 people tied down on the track. If you do nothing they will be killed by the runaway train. Luckily you notice a lever that will divert the train onto a side spur, where it will run over only one person. What should you do?

Most people say they would pull the lever and divert the train. Saving five lives is morally right, even though one person dies as a result.

Now suppose you are standing on a bridge over the railway and you see a train careering towards five people tied down on the track. This time you can save the five by pushing a very fat man who happens to be standing next to you off the bridge and onto the track. He is large enough to stop the train and save five lives, but unfortunately he will be killed. What should you do?

Most people say they would not push the fat man.

And when I say ‘most people’ this result is remarkably consistent among different cultures and countries.

The odd thing about this is that both scenarios involve sacrificing one life to save five, but we respond to them very differently. Why?

I don’t have time to go into the possible explanations, but you may want to ponder on whether or not this kind of philosophy gives us any practical guidance for our life choices.

You are the people who will shape our future in a very rapidly changing and uncertain world. What kind of future will that be?

My generation, the post war baby boomers, have spent our lives in a period when people in this country have become richer year on year, and bought more and more stuff.

But it is worth pausing the think whether or not this pathway of ever increasing wealth and consumption is desirable.

As I illustrated at the start, it’s not as though being a consumer stress free. So perhaps a move from endless consumerism to other values might be positive.

Furthermore, eventually we will reach, or may have already reached, the limits of the earth’s capacity to sustain growth and consumption.

Previous generations, including my own, have grown richer by being profligate in their exploitation of the earth’s resources.

I apologise for this.

We have left you with the huge task of dealing with the consequences, including the impacts of man-made climate change.

If you are to create a safer, greener, more sustainable world, you must defend the values of the Enlightenment.

To quote Francis Wheen, these values are: “...an insistence on intellectual autonomy, a rejection of tradition and authority as infallible sources of truth, a loathing of bigotry and persecution, a commitment to free enquiry ... of progress, rights and freedom”.

I want to end by wishing you success. What is success?

Is it owning a big house, enjoying expensive holidays, contribution to wider society, having fun?

The American poet Bessie Stanley, in her poem “success” put it like this:

*To laugh often and love much
To win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children
To earn the approbation of honest critics
And to endure the betrayal of false friends
To have played with enthusiasm and sung with exultation
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived
This is to have succeeded*