

## **For freedom Christ has set us free**

*Luke 9:51-55, Gal 5:1, 13-14*

*30 June 2019*

It happened during the days of the Cold War, when as a teenager I lived in Hungary, behind the so-called 'Iron Curtain'. One Sunday afternoon a group of English students visited our youth club in my father's church. Those of us, who could speak a little English, tried to entertain them, and as young people do, we soon found ways of communicating with each other in spite of our language differences. It all went very well until the leader of the visitors, the English minister started with his probing questions: 'Are you free to worship the way you want to? Are you allowed to do missionary work? Are you able to buy Bibles freely in your country?'

Suddenly the whole atmosphere had changed. Up till that moment we were all just carefree young Christians together, sharing interests, finding hymns we both knew, exchanging addresses in the hope of keeping in touch. From that point on a divisive issue crept in between us: 'freedom!' I am sure it was not intentional on the part of that minister, but as he raised the question of political & religious freedom, the hosting group was made to feel in some way deficient and inferior on account of something, which was totally beyond their control.

The concept of freedom, the different perceptions of freedom is a very important issue for us human beings. One understanding of it is 'doing one's own thing', doing as you please without hindrance, a total autonomy, complete independence, a release from all obligations. But if we think about freedom in this way we come to the same conclusion that the writers of the Bible arrived at. This sort of freedom is an illusion. No wonder our politicians are finding their way through the BREXIT negotiations with such difficulty, as they are, after all, about what kind of freedom this country wants.

And it is the same with our individual freedoms as well. For, just think, I may want to travel to the Moon, or just round the world, but if I haven't got the money to do it, I can't do it. I am not free, I am limited by economic factors. I may want something that belongs to someone else. If it is in my power to get it, does it mean I am free to get it? Maybe. If it is for sale and I can afford it, I may be able to buy it. If it's not, I may still pursue the matter and 'make an offer the owner cannot refuse'. In military terms, I may go into battle for it. In

business terms, I may make a hostile take-over bid and if I am the stronger, eventually I may get it by force at someone else's expense. The question is how far am I willing to go in pursuit of my own freedom, when it is – as it's bound to be sooner or later – limited by other people's freedom. Nelson Mandela, the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century freedom fighter, who spent some 28 years of his life deprived of his freedom, answered the question this way:

*To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.*

Well, the Bible tackles the same question in remarkably similar way showing an amazingly realistic assessment of human nature. Whilst recognising our desire for freedom, it also recognises our even more basic human need for relationships, some kind of spiritual bond, which provides meaning, truth and a measure of certainty to our lives. That in order to have this spiritual bond, we all accept some sort of limitation to our freedom. It calls this limitation God. We all have our God, or gods, whose authority we accept, by whom we are guided, to whom we sacrifice everything. For some people it is success, or prestige, for others it is wealth, career, family, power or social standing. For communities it may be communal or national pride, the idea of being leader among the nations, or even – God forbid - being a superior race.

These 'false gods' - as the Bible calls them – drive people on mercilessly to newer and newer achievements in the belief that the achievement equals the person. The more money I earn the more respectable I am. The more influence I have the more powerful I am. The more expensive schools I send my children to, the better parent I am. The more authority I have the more masculine I am. The prettier I look the more feminine I am.

According to the Bible freedom means being liberated from dependence on these false gods. True freedom comes from the knowledge that my life has a meaning purely in itself, because God has made me, loved me into life and I am bearing God's image. It has nothing to do with achievements or external circumstances. It is a kind of inner freedom, and it shines out from those who possess it. It is certainly not something that gives moral superiority to those who are physically free over those who are not. True freedom recognises and nurtures this inner freedom in everybody regardless of their outward circumstances. Jesus possessed this freedom all his life

and demonstrated it especially clearly through his Passion. Even as he was dying on the cross, he was free to recognise another son of God in the criminal dying beside him. This recognition had such a liberating effect on his fellow sufferer that he was able to die in peace with himself and with his God.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Galatians brings us the Apostle Paul's understanding of Christian freedom. And since Paul is far the most vocal advocate of human freedom in the Bible, it may be useful for us to listen to him. '*For freedom Christ has set us free*' - he says – *Stand firm therefore and refuse to submit again to the yoke of slavery.*' (5:1) Freedom, for Paul, has two aspects: freedom from something and freedom for something. So, what was this yoke of slavery the Galatian Christians were asked to leave behind? Well, in their particular case it was circumcision, the outward mark of their identity as the chosen people of God prescribed for them in the ancient laws of Israel.

There was a story behind Paul's warning. As the Christian faith spread in the wake of his missionary activities, some other missionaries arrived in Galatia after him. They insisted that all new converts had to go through the Jewish rite of circumcision, a right that gave Jewish men not only their religious, but also their national identity. Paul, who, himself had been circumcised according to the ancient custom, had seen the danger of this ruling. If it were to be obeyed, it would have made the Christian faith into a restricted, exclusive religion, in which a particular ritual would make someone acceptable rather than the free, fundamentally transformed life he and the other followers of Jesus had experienced. Their new identity liberated them from the ancient law and every other binding tie that would give them false identity.

This was a revolutionary insight, as if someone today said to us, you do not have to cling to your identity of a First World, western, middle class citizen. The fact that you are a woman as opposed to a man – and vice versa – need not be the most important thing about you. Belonging to a particular organisation, professing this or that kind of politics may not define who you are. It is not that these things are wrong in themselves, but that in the kingdom of God they become irrelevant.

As we look at Jesus' life we see him displaying extraordinary freedom. He is free from his fellow countrymen's nationalism as he talks to Samaritans, hated neighbours of Judah

and and lifts them up as models of moral goodness. He is free from sexism in a deeply patriarchal society as he gives women equal value and respect. He is free from blinkered religiosity as he touches ritually unclean people and associates with so-called unsavoury characters. And in our Gospel reading we find him free from justifiable resentment and urges of revenge. The rejection of a hostile village does not make him misuse the powers available to him. So, where does his freedom come from? It seems to come from his close relationship with God, whom he experienced as his loving Father. A relationship that was so strong that it freed him from any other role and allegiance, it filled his life with ultimate meaning and a certainty about himself and about the world around him.

According to the Apostle Paul we have been called to the same kind of freedom through the same kind of relationship bestowed on us by God's Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Freedom. In that relationship we too may be liberated from all the finite values that limit us and box us into national, social, religious or gender stereotypes.

But more than that, this relationship frees us for something: for abundant life spent without fear, guilt or shame, and feelings of inferiority or superiority, for that matter. Responding to God with gratitude, hope and joy. Pledging our allegiance to Jesus and walking his way in the company of others as Dorothy and Kevin has just done. And as Jesus expressed his faith by turning to others and showed them the depth of God's love and total commitment to humanity, we too are called to do the same: To find our true identity as beloved children of God and to liberate others by letting them be free to be themselves and follow Christ in their own unique way. Let it be so.

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