

What is freedom? (John 8:31-38, Galatians 5:13-21) – LENT COURSE 2015 WK1

Begin our Lent series today – ‘The Way to Freedom’. The inspiration for the course was a poem written in prison in 1944 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (DB), the German Lutheran pastor and theologian executed by the Nazis for his role in the resistance to Hitler. The poem was called ‘Stations on the Way to Freedom’ and copies of the poem together with a short summary of the course are available on the table by the door. Please do take one, there’s plenty available.

This week is an introduction to the series, looking at ‘What is freedom?’ Thereafter for 4 of the next 5 weeks we’ll be studying the poem in 4 chunks with related bible readings – with a break on 15th March for Mothering Sunday, where we’ll be looking at the idea of Community instead.

As usual, we also have Lent groups available, which meet during the week and will give us all the chance to go into greater depth with the same theme as we’ve looked at on the Sunday. So if today whets your appetite, and you want to explore this important stuff more, then please do join any one of the 8 groups available – Tues eve 7.45pm at the Rectory next door (do join us!), Wed morning 9.30am at CtK; Thurs eve 7.30pm hosted by Gill Farrow at All Saints (details) – or contact Lou to join any of the 5 CtK groups which between them cover virtually every night of the week.

May not be your usual tradition to go to a midweek group, but Lent is a special time of year where many Christians make a special effort to grow – we’ve put a lot of work into pulling this material together and there are a lot of groups available. So do talk to me (or email) or talk to Alise or Lou if you’re not already part of a group and would like to join one.

So to today, and our introductory question: What is freedom? – TURN TO NEIGHBOUR & DISCUSS:

- What do you think real freedom is?
- Who is most free person you know? (FEEDBACK)

For me, when I think of people who seem to be free, they’re people who are happy being themselves, they’re not driven by what other people think of them, or by fear of failure or whatever. We all have a secret fear (will talk about in depth some other time) something that drives us, and in a way imprisons us. Most people live their whole lives not really conscious of it, but other people can see it: fear might be rejection or abandonment, failure, being unpopular, punishment.

Free people live as they feel called to live. Not necessarily selfish – that’s another form of bondage. Note another key word: ‘called’. To have a real calling serving others or some greater good, which gives you purpose and inspires your life: that’s real freedom, isn’t it?

Famous examples: Nelson Mandela – coped with 27 years’ in prison and able to forgive and lead a nation with dignity. That is real freedom. DB another: how can he write about freedom in prison?

Freedom a lesson he already learnt – said back in 1932: ‘To be free is to be in love, is to be in the truth of God. The one who loves because made free by the truth of God, is the most revolutionary person on earth’ (REPEAT)

Today we'll compare society's definitions of freedom with true freedom, using passages we had read, and some little prepositions – helpful to think of freedom plus something...

Freedom of – in society it's freedom of...(ASK)

Add mine: **(1) choice** – choice is really our god. What consumerism's all about. Power of personal choice. On small levels – toothpaste or shampoo (count brands). Or big ones – school or GP. Often a sham choice, but politicians talk all the time about choice because we've been led to believe that we all deserve it, it's our right. Choice gives us a godlike power – we can have this or this, we can choose that or that. We're completely free to choose.

Oliver James 'The tyranny of choice' – too much choice a bad thing. Who has a relative that can't choose their food in a restaurant? Or can't choose shampoo in a supermarket? Choosing things rules our lives, and each choice becomes stressful because there's so many factors to include. How did Nelson Mandela live so free when all his choices were taken away? Or indeed DB? These people suggest to us that we don't need choice to be free nearly as much as we thought.

(2) Expression – hot topic, in news at mo – Charlie Hebdo. Sad about debate – freedom to say what you think doesn't mean freedom to be deliberately offensive. Nothing excuses the violence of what happened, but what about courtesy? To say nothing of the fact that the front cover of the magazine after the murders led to widespread violence against Christians in Niger, leaving 10 dead and 70 churches destroyed. No excuse, but being deliberately offensive causes casualties.

Freedom to... (ASK)

Add mine: sort of answer would be – do what I want / live how I please / exercise my rights. All effectively an extension of idea of 'freedom of choice'. My right to decide how I live. Not new – goes right back to Genesis 3 – where did that get Adam and Eve? Human beings haven't changed much – just put our selfishness in different clothing.

Freedom from... (ASK)

Add mine: **(1) risk** – health and safety mafia. Idea that all risk is a bad thing, we can't accept that mistakes and accidents happen – and any accidents must have someone to punish and blame (usually financially). Of course, there are disasters that should be avoided and punished, but I think we've gone way over the top. Freedom from risk now feels like another sort of prison.

(2) Worry and fear – so many soothing CDs, various forms of relaxation treatments, medical help. Do anything but pray and turn to God. Big issue – for all our rights and freedom of choice, society slowly realising that our modern way of living is not making us freer or happier. We've just chosen different prisons for ourselves.

So what is real freedom?

John 8 – Jesus begins the answer. Expanding it over next few weeks, but a great place to start. Looking at same categories, in reverse order – some insight into what true Christian freedom is:

Freedom from.... SLAVERY TO SIN. READ v34, v36. What is our greatest source of slavery: lack of rights, lack of choice, lack of education, lack of money, physical imprisonment? Wrong - one thing enslaves every human being on this planet, and Jesus names it: SIN. Our basic selfishness, our capacity to rebel against God. Form of slavery. No such thing is little sins – ‘everyone who sins is a slave to it.’ Often reduce slavery to ‘addiction’ – extreme form. Compulsion in most sin: when someone wrongs you – desire for revenge. When see something you really want (nice car, big house, Christmas jumper) – jealousy, desire to own.

Fundamental truth: selfishness is our main form of slavery. Traps and imprisons us. Why? Not just compulsion, or harmful consequences, or even punishment for not living as should. *Made for relationship: stops us connecting with God and with others.*

Christ offers us freedom *from* slavery to sin. Also offers us **freedom to** something else: to **KNOW THE TRUTH**, READ v32. The truth sets us free – where is truth located? READ v31b. Jesus’ teaching is the truth. Lots of other places where *some* truth is found – but the truth is found in Jesus’ teaching.

He doesn’t elaborate here on anything in particular, so need to assume that it’s all of it. Challenge to re-commit ourselves again to studying and living Jesus’ teaching – both in gospels and its outworking as explained in rest of NT. The Word of God has the truth which sets us free. Free to live as the people we were made to be, free to be forgiven, to worship God, to obey him and find eternal life.

Maybe this Lent is the time you need to raise the bar again . Good financial practice involves investing in the right things – same with faith. What are you investing in? Doesn’t happen automatically. *Will you choose to invest in the truth which sets you free?* If you invest in the Word of God, you’ll reap a big dividend.

Freedom of... choice. God doesn’t force himself on us – Jesus gives the crowd a choice: READ v31 – then by v59. We all have a choice – we can choose the truth that sets us free or continue to live as self-centred slaves. That’s why Lent is the ‘way to freedom’ – it leads to the cross and to the resurrection, to the source of our freedom.

One final freedom – from, to, of... but ultimately we need **freedom for something.** Freedom with a purpose. Galatians 5 – v1 – for freedom that Christ has set us free – backed up v13a READ. But what are we free FOR? 2 things:

To serve others – if selfishness is a form of slavery, then makes sense that freedom found in selflessness, in serving others. Paul makes point in v13 – READ. Word for ‘serve’ and ‘slaves’ same – Paul having a joke – actually you’re still slaves – but not to yourselves, but to each other! And this is real freedom! (Hear him chuckling.)

Freedom for holy living. (Jesus ‘hold fast to my teaching’) – READ v16. True freedom has a purpose, a calling. To serve and to be holy.

So as we begin this Lent - 2 simple questions: are you free? And what are you free for?

And may God grant us all grace this Lent to grow in the true freedom which he longs for each of us to experience. Amen.