

LENT COURSE 2015: The Way to Freedom

Introduction

No word seems to matter more to us today than 'Freedom'. But what it means is often far from clear and equally often sparks controversy. It's a big word in the New Testament, and in the Christian story through the ages. But what actually is 'Christian freedom', and how does it relate to all the other 'freedoms' we say that we value in our lives and in society?

In this course we are taking our cues from a poem 'Stations on the Way to Freedom' written in prison in 1944 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian executed by the Nazis for his role in the resistance to Hitler. Twelve years earlier in 1932 he had said: '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'; and his last recorded words when being taken away for his final trial and execution were: 'This is the end - for me the beginning of life'.

We shan't primarily be studying Bonhoeffer as such, but rather using him for jumping-off points to reflect on the quest for freedom in our own experience, the life of our churches, and what's going on in our society and the world today – and all in the light of our reading of the Bible. The text of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem follows below, and is well worth meditating on, aside from our studies this Lent:

Stations on the Way to Freedom (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1944)

Discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, then you must learn above all things
Discipline of your soul and your senses,
Lest passions and instincts lead you now hither, now thither, in random directions.
Chaste be your mind and body, completely subjected,
In obedience seeking the aim that is set before them;
None learns the mystery of freedom with discipline lost.

Action

Daring to do what is right, not what fancy may tell you,
Seizing reality boldly, not weighing up chances,
Freedom's in action alone, not in wavering thought.
Leave aside anxious delay and go into the storm of our history,
Borne along solely by faith and God's will and commandment;
Freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy.

Suffering

A change has come indeed.
Your hands, so strong and active, are bound; in helplessness now you see your action is ended;
you sigh in relief, your cause committing to stronger hands; so now you may rest contented.
Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet touch of freedom;
then you gave it to God.

Death

Come now, thou greatest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal;
death, cast aside all the burdensome chains, and demolish the walls of our temporal body,
the walls of our souls that are blinded,
so that at last we may see that which here remains hidden.
Freedom, how long we have sought thee in discipline, action, and suffering;
dying, we now may behold thee revealed in the Lord.

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

Course Overview

These are the readings and themes for each Sunday. We have provided two readings for those churches which typically have two readings. Where one reading forms the major focus of the study group material, this one is underlined. In some weeks, however, both passages are used more or less equally:

Sunday 22nd February Week 1: 'What is freedom?' - Galatians 5:13-21, John 8:31-38

Sunday 1st March Week 2: 'Discipline' – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Matthew 4:1-11

Sunday 8th March Week 3: 'Action' – Psalm 55:1-11, Mark 2:1-11

Sunday 15th March Week 4: 'Community' (Mothering Sunday) – Philippians 2:1-11, Mark 9:33-37

Sunday 22nd March Week 5: 'Suffering' – 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, John 21:15-19

Sunday 29th March Week 6: 'Death' (Palm Sunday) – Philippians 1:20-25, John 12:12-36

In this course we are taking our cues from a poem 'Stations on the Way to Freedom' written in prison in 1944 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian executed by the Nazis for his role in the resistance to Hitler. The poem, and a little more detail about the course, follows on the next page. What follows below is a brief summary of the content of the study groups which will follow each Sunday's theme:

Week 1: What is Freedom?

This week's material looks at definitions of freedom. We compare those definitions given by the world around us with Jesus' and Paul's definitions in the bible, in an attempt to answer: what is 'Christian freedom'?

Week 2: The Way to Freedom: DISCIPLINE

This week's material looks at a word which has become deeply unfashionable in our culture: discipline. Along the way, we'll be reflecting on Jesus' temptations as an example of discipline and freedom belonging together. We'll also reflect on what we can learn from monastic life about the value and importance of discipline.

Week 3: The Way to Freedom: ACTION

This week's material looks at how we are often paralysed by the pressures of the world around us, or our own insecurities, preferring to 'escape' and live in the world of thought. Bonhoeffer challenges us to another path to freedom: the way of action.

Week 4: The Church as Community

The material this week follows Mothering Sunday, which originated as a moment in Lent when people were given freedom to return to their 'mother church'. In time, the fact that someone's home community was also where their family (including mother) lived and worshipped led to a change of emphasis, where (especially) girls in service were given leave to visit their mother, as well as 'mother church'. Nowadays, of course, the community origins of Mothering Sunday have been almost entirely lost, replaced with a secularised version which celebrates mothers and 'mother figures'. Our session this week takes its cue from the original Mothering Sunday: we will be reflecting on the theme of community, and on what it means to be part of it.

Week 5: The Way to Freedom: SUFFERING

This week's material looks at the role of suffering in our journey towards freedom. This might at first seem to be a contradiction in terms: however the witness of Jesus and Paul has long prompted the Christian tradition to reflect on suffering in various ways, not all of them negative. Many of us will have direct experience of forms of suffering and may find it hard to see anything positive in such experiences. So let us pray that we may have 'ears to hear' an alternative viewpoint.

Week 6: The Way to Freedom: DEATH (Optional extra week for individual or group reflection)

This week's material looks at the link between death and resurrection in the Easter story. We'll reflect on whether we have a healthy attitude towards death, and also whether we allow the full force of Good Friday to be 'diluted' by the happy ending of Easter Sunday.