

The Way to Freedom: DISCIPLINE (Matthew 4:1-11, 1 Cor 9:24-27) – LENT COURSE 2015, WEEK 2

(SLIDE) What think of when hear word discipline? (DISCUSS)

- Usually negative connotations
- ILLUSTRATION Mortar board and cane ('hurt me more than hurt you')
- Nowadays - naughty step (not much use in a flat, show our step in church)

Usually a word to make us shudder. Want to challenge that today – cast discipline in a positive light, as the first step on the way to freedom. 2nd week of Lent series – Way to Freedom – poem by DB, famous pastor executed by Nazis. Written in prison in 1944 – describes way to freedom in 4 steps, of which the first is this: Discipline.

Can pick up poem at back, but here's the first verse:

**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.**

REPEAT FINAL LINE (SLIDE) – how can he say that? That's our topic for today. Begin by quoting study material we're using for this course:

“Bonhoeffer's poem is speaking about different kind of discipline: self-discipline. This is not so much a matter of conforming to rules set by others or by society or the state..., but of making spirit and body 'subject to yourself completely'. It is already a kind of freedom, because it means not being pulled this way or that by the whim or impulse of the moment, but always aiming for 'the goal that is set for your spirit'. To have a clear and right goal in view is to be free. So, far from being contradictory, 'discipline' and 'freedom' belong together.” (week 2, p16)

Can see what saying – picks up many of themes of last week. Freedom involves having a real purpose for our lives, one that inspires us and blesses others. It's also about being secure in yourself, knowing who you are and where you're going. As we touched upon last week, Jesus was the most free person who ever lived. (SLIDE) Completely unaffected by peer pressure, or threats, or pressure – always himself, always true to his calling. But not selfish – so often people like that can be self-centred and leave a trail of casualties in their wake. But Jesus was not only all that, he was still brilliant at relationships – he was completely comfortable with people, he could relate to anyone, he could bless them, love them and minister to them – and yet still be completely himself. That strikes me as true freedom.

And our main passage for today picks up on that thought – takes us to a passage at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, a famous story which is our usual bible reading for the 2nd Sunday in Lent – the temptations of Jesus. (SLIDE)

If Jesus really is the real deal, how's he going to cope at his weakest? 40 days in the desert without food and company, and devil comes to him. Not a fairy story – lots of desert next to Israel, and Jewish sect called Essenes lived out there. This is entirely possible for a young, passionate Jew – but what happens next is amazing. We witness a high drama – like the gunfight at OK Corral, without the guns. Who is going to blink first, the devil or Jesus?

Famous story, and has a meaning on lots of levels. Parallel of 40 years of Israel in desert – very significant. It's about obedience – will Jesus remain truly obedient where Israel, God's chosen people, had let him down? It's about kingship – if Jesus really is God's new king, what kind of king will he be? Will he abuse his authority?

Also about freedom. (SLIDE) We can read this passage as a **contest about freedom**. The devil comes to Jesus at his weakest and offers him what appear to be forms of worldly freedom. You're free, Jesus, to do what you want. You don't have to be hungry. Go on, be free: eat some food now.

And Jesus says no: true freedom is found in the Word of God READ v4. Back to last week – truth that sets us free.

Then the devil says, you're free, Jesus. You've got all that divine power, why not show people who you really are? Put on a show: READ v6a

And Jesus says no: true freedom is found in the Will of God READ v7 – don't push the boundaries to satisfy your own ego, stay within the will of God.

Finally the devil says, you're free, Jesus, to worship who you please. Make a pact with me and we'll run the world together.

And Jesus says no: true freedom is found in the Worship of God READ v10.

And Jesus wins out. The devil leaves him, and it's no surprise that, having proved himself faithful, Jesus begins his public ministry. (PAUSE)

What we have here is a story about freedom – the freedom that comes from self-discipline – or as DB puts it, 'discipline of your soul and senses'. Jesus was completely in control of himself, his physical cravings, his emotional needs – and that gave him tremendous freedom. (Also tremendous authority and appeal, but that's another story.)

The path to freedom starts with self-discipline. Challenging thought, an idea that runs counter to most modern culture, which thinks exactly the opposite - freedom found in self-indulgence. Vast numbers of casualties: millions locked in debt, millions more in forms of addiction.

Amazing how quickly our culture changed. (SLIDE) Generation that lived through 2nd World War knew about discipline – forced by war, but lessons learnt then shaped a generation. Temperance movements of 18th and 19th century, even sport as we know it was a way of teaching discipline and shaping character.

Part of society waking up to the problem of our indulgent, instant-me society – (SLIDE) e.g. temporary disciplines of diets. Self-help manuals (many of which teach secularised or subtly adapted versions of Christian principles). Growth of Buddhism – disciplined lifestyle. Plus Buddhist monks are cool – or it least it seems that way in modern media.

Forgets that Christian history has its own monks – nowadays tiny numbers – an ‘oddity’. Monastic movement tremendously dynamic movement which shaped church, especially for 400 year period 250-650AD. (SLIDE) Monasteries which pioneered social care as we know it, building schools and hospitals for their communities. Also evangelized much of W and N Europe, bringing gospel to France, Germany, Britain and Ireland. (Worth studying – early monks are forgotten heroes.)

We owe a huge amount to the monks – founding principles? (ASK)

Poverty, chastity and obedience. Goes back to Jesus’ 3 temptations. Modern translation:

- Poverty – or in other words, to conquer our physical cravings: Living simply
- Chastity – or in other words to conquer our cravings for excitement and experience: Restraint
- Obedience – to God above all – or in other words, Ordered living

These ideas have been deeply unfashionable for decades, but imagine a world marked by: (SLIDE) Simple living, Restraint and Obedience. We would feed the world. We would care a lot better for it, and might not tip over the edge into ecological disaster. There’d be hardly any crime, hardly any debt, hardly any families destroyed by addictions. I think that would be a world which is a lot more free than the one we’ve currently got, wouldn’t it?

The path to freedom starts with our capacity for self-discipline. But don’t expect to get very far on your own! We need help – we need supportive people around us – that’s why monks live in community. Above all, we need Jesus’ help. Jesus could do what people can’t – makes sense therefore that we can only really grasp true freedom if we ask for Jesus’ help to do it, His power living in us by His Spirit.

(Why baptise in name of Spirit – Alfie will need Spirit’s power to help grow up as a follower of Jesus.) Also why most self-help manuals fail. Repeating mistake of Israel thousands of years ago – we can’t do this stuff without God’s help. Our human frailties get in the way. Challenge today not just to rethink the value of discipline, but ask God for help to really do it!

REPEAT POEM to end. Amen.