

Called to Freedom Pentecost 4 - 27th June 2010

Readings:

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom for the opportunity for self indulgence, but through love becomes slaves to one another.”

Galatians 5:13

A few weeks ago I decided to mow the lawn. It was a beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon. A breeze was blowing, gently drying the long grass. It was a good day to be outside. But it was a Sunday. And there was a little part of me that was just a little guilty. For a brief moment I actually thought - should I be doing this on a Sunday. You see my teenage years were spent in a church where mowing lawns on a Sunday was considered a sin. In fact after church on Sunday, I was even a little reluctant to enter a shop. Another sin. I even knew a saintly couple who did all their cooking on Saturday so that no work would be done on Sunday. This, I was led to believe was what it meant to follow Christ.

But even back then, I used to wonder if keeping rules like these was what being a disciple of Christ is all about. I'd remember Jesus words about “the Sabbath being made for humans not humans for the Sabbath.” And so the other Sunday I mowed my lawn - and enjoyed it.

But you know my dilemma about mowing on a Sunday is an old one. That's what Paul was writing to the church in Galatia about. He was more than a bit peeved that some of the members there were looking to the old Jewish rules concerning circumcision and diet. Apparently some Judaizing teachers were going around Galatia and Asia Minor telling the people in the churches Paul had planted that it was not enough to have faith in Jesus Christ, but that they had also to keep the Mosaic law. Paul was not amused and in verse 12 of chapter 5 he says that he would like to do something more damaging than circumcision if he could catch up with these teachers.

Our reading from Galatians this morning begins, **“For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm and do not submit to the yoke of slavery.”**

Yet we humans, in Paul's time and today, seem prone to submit again and again to the yoke of slavery in all its forms, both inside and outside the church.

What then is this freedom that Christ brings? It's the question the Galatian church struggled with and one that even today we are not sure about. In our current age an answer is all the harder to obtain because we live in a society where the word freedom usually means freedom for people to do exactly what they want. Every one has a right to be happy, everyone has freedom of choice in our free-enterprise system. That's right isn't it? We have made individual freedom an absolute value in our free country in the free world.

But I wonder if that's the freedom Christ brings? A freedom to do exactly what we want. Paul in his epistle to the Galatians goes on to say in v.13 that they, the Galatians, **“were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”** Freedom for Paul has more to do with serving

one another rather than gratifying ourselves. Yet I fear that in our society, freedom has another meaning altogether, more to do with self gratification.

Hans Kung, the famous German teacher and theologian, tells a sad, true tale in a book entitled "Eternal Life", of a young theological student who seeking to be free saw no answers to his questions and in the end committed suicide. All his needs were being met by material things - yet he felt he was not free.

In his last letter for his fellow students he wrote,
"I wanted milk and got a bottle. I wanted parents and got a toy. I wanted to talk and got a book. I wanted to learn and got report cards. I wanted to think and got knowledge. I wanted to be free and got discipline. I wanted love and got morality. I wanted a calling and got a job. I wanted happiness and was given money. I wanted freedom and got a car. I wanted meaning and got a career. I wanted hope and got fear. I wanted to change and received sympathy. I wanted to live...."

I wanted to live. Each of his wants is met - by a material response. His need for relationship is answered with things. Ironically this young theological student seems to know nothing of Jesus saying that in order to keep our lives we must lose them. In order to be free, we need to submit ourselves, give ourselves to be slaves of God and slaves to others. Perhaps this would have been the answer to the young man's despair.

For it's the answer Jesus gives to his disciples in the today's Gospel, as he sets his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem, as he sought to serve the whole world by giving up his life. Jesus tells an eager disciple who has vowed to follow him wherever he goes, that following him means that "while foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." How's that for freedom!

The freedom Christ brings to his followers is the freedom from enslavement of materialism. Of having objects meet our every need. Yet our lives can be consumed with providing for ourselves our very own fox holes and nests. For the vast majority of our world that is the thing that consumes us most. We need to get ahead. We need possessions for security. But it's not freedom.

And the church, Christ's body on earth, at time is no better. We in the church can become consumed with our own fox holes, our nests, sometimes spending more time and energy worrying about providing for our buildings than we do the people who visit them. Our building can often become more important than our faith. That's why any work being done around our church, like the renovations of the bluestone manse, need to be seen in terms of how the work will enhance our ministry, our serving the community around us. We are not free if we spend more time talking about our property than we do talking about our mission. A mission of service to others. As Paul says **"For we were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom for an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another."** Galatians 5:13.

And in vs 19-21 of Galatians 5, Paul gives us a list of other enslaving agents that we face. He calls them desires of the flesh, desires of the self if you like, that can easily enslave us. For they are all about satisfying ourselves. All about me, me, me!

There's the bodily self-centredness that Paul says comes through "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, and carousing."

There's the religious self-centredness that Paul says comes through "idolatry and sorcery."

There's the social self-centredness that Paul says comes through "enmities, strife, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy."

And we live in a society where we are often encouraged to be free - free to engage in all these desires as our right. More and more our values are changing from community-centredness to self-centredness. To be free to follow the desires of our hearts.

But Jesus Christ brings another way. A way of being led by the Spirit. By contrast we are given the fruits of the Spirit. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control".

They are called fruits - because they are not to be achieved by our own efforts. We need the nurturing Spirit before they can come into operation. And you'll note that all nine of them are outwardly focused. They are not fruits to be enjoyed for their own sake. They are for sharing in community.

Just think of a world where love, joy and peace are the criteria for living. Think of a church! Think of a world where we patiently work with one another - not jumping to conclusions, eager to condemn a mistake when it is made. Think of a church! Think of a world outdoing itself with acts of random kindness and generosity, where we share rather than hoard to ourselves. Think of a church! Think of a world characterised by faithfulness, gentleness and self control, where people are willing to be with others in all the positives and negatives of modern living. Think of a church like that!

For this is the freedom that we are called to in Jesus Christ. That's what it means to give ourselves to Christ. To die to self so that Christ might live in us. To be truly free.

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