

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 26th June 2016

Trinity 5 / Proper 8 'Christian Freedom'

2 Kings 2:1,2,6-14 Galatians 5:1,13-25 Luke 9:51-62

'for freedom Christ has set us free'; so writes Paul to the Galatians; and this is the great theme of his letter – that through Jesus we've been set free from the constraints of the Jewish law; in particular, in regard to the requirement for circumcision

do we think of ourselves as being 'free'? we certainly are free, in a number of areas:

we are free to worship on a Sunday, to come to the church of our choice, without fear of reprisals; that's a freedom many Christians in the world today do not enjoy

we are free to spend our money as we wish, to wear the clothes and eat the food and take the holidays we like; just browse the supermarket shelves, or watch the TV ads, and reflect on the extraordinary amount of choice we are offered in every area – that's a kind of freedom!

we are free to live in our homes – generally – without fear of assault or intrusion; we are free to marry and to have families; to engage in hobbies, or political activities; we are free to campaign and to vote in elections, or in last week's referendum; again a freedom not to be taken for granted

we value those freedoms, and we're prepared to fight for them; this year's 90th birthday celebrations for the Queen have brought to mind again the struggles that she – and many of us here – have witnessed in defence of our political freedom

many of the arguments over EU membership were based on ideas of freedom: one side saying we want to be free *from* the control of Brussels; the other that we want to be free *to* trade across international boundaries – and so on

I can now 'come out' as having voted to *remain*; there was a distinct irony for us that our recent week away before the referendum was spent in France with a mixed choir of English, Dutch and German singers, wondering what was going to happen on the other side of the Channel; well, we have voted for a certain kind of freedom – it remains to be seen just how that works out!

because freedom is never absolute or complete; it is always subject to constraints – social, political, economic, moral; our freedom 'under the law' is always limited by the needs and rights of those around us; 'no man is an island, entire unto himself', wrote John Donne; our 'free' choices affect others and theirs affect us

so how does Christian freedom, 'freedom in Christ', fit into this framework? Paul writes: 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'

ok, so our freedom means that we are not to be bound by, or slaves to, religious regulations, say, concerning circumcision, as though those could put us right with God; only his grace can do that

but Paul continues: 'you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become *slaves* to one another.'

here is the great divide, in regard to freedom: is it about me and what I am free to do? is it so that I can indulge in whatever takes my fancy, regardless of the consequences for anyone else? by no means! for Paul our freedom is always expressed in relationship, and in submission to the needs of others

he goes on: 'the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."'

any expression of Christian freedom is always shaped by the law of love; we're to be 'slaves to one another' not in the sense of a yoke imposed upon us, but in the sense of a discipline that is freely and willingly assented to

the other view of freedom – that it is all about me, and my freedom to choose and consume – readily becomes an idol; it is worship of that idol that drives our economy; it is all about 'gratifying the desires of the flesh'; the flesh for Paul is not of course limited to the *physical body* itself, but encompasses everything that puts *me* at the centre

the 'works of the flesh' that Paul lists here form an all too familiar catalogue of the ills of society, though we might phrase them differently today; how about this? 'the works of the flesh today are: sexual abuse and pornography; political and religious factions; greed and envy of other's possessions; violent and drunken crowds on the streets of Marseille or Slough or wherever'

just look at the way the EU referendum campaign was conducted, or the US presidential nominations: issue of freedom to act and to choose were at the centre of these campaigns, and yet that freedom was expressed in such negative ways *within* the campaign, in personal attacks, falsehoods, underhand manoeuvrings, divisive rhetoric, demonization of minorities – is that the way our freedom should be expressed?

these 'works of the flesh' form a very unattractive list; no one is going to set them to music in a catchy song; and it is not the kind of freedom we are called to as Christians, or that Paul longs for his readers to enjoy!

instead, writes Paul, 'if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit'; it is only as we freely submit to the guidance and transforming power of the Holy Spirit that the 'fruit of the Spirit' can grow and find expression in our lives: yes, we know a little song about these: 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'

what a compact and beautiful list these fruit make, in comparison to the ugly, tangled mess of the 'works of the flesh'! these fruit may seem slow in growing at times – I know that for myself! but they're what is promised to us as we allow our freedom to be shaped by the law of God's love – *there is our true freedom!*

of course, we know it is not plain sailing, there are challenges in living this life of freedom in Christ; we find some of these expressed in the gospel reading, from Luke 9, where we see people wrestling with what it means to be a follower of Jesus

when a Samaritan village turns away this group of Jews heading for Jerusalem, James and John want to do an 'Elijah' (see 2 Kings 1) by calling down fire from heaven to consume them

they're such a long way from understanding how to use the new power and freedom they have as disciples of Jesus; by contrast, Jesus himself has 'set his face towards Jerusalem' and it is there that they will discover how he exercises power and freedom, as he follows the way of the cross

then we meet three potential disciples along the road; are these actual encounters, or are they offered as examples or parables of discipleship, to bring home that following Jesus, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, practising Christian freedom, all come at a cost?

Jesus is saying:

if you wish to follow me, you will, like me, have nowhere to lay your head; you will be a pilgrim, a nomad, always on the move; you will not be assured of the comforts and security of home

if you wish to follow me, you will, like me, have to be ready to let go of family obligations; because proclaiming the Kingdom of God has to be the most important thing in your life

and, if you wish to follow me, you will, like me, have to set your face forward, towards the inevitable outcomes of struggle, suffering, even death; there can be no turning back and longing for what you've left behind

in short, we cannot follow Jesus just as we choose, or on our own terms; we may choose Jesus freely, but then we are bound by obedience to his way; we have a good example of single-minded dedication in the story of Elisha claiming his inheritance from Elijah ...

a criticism that is often levelled at Christianity (and other faiths), is that it constrains freedom, imposes rules, limits choice

but we believe we find our true freedom in submission to God's will and in following the path that Jesus sets before us; as Jesus himself says, 'if the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed' – that is our perfect freedom!

to end, a prayer from the Prayer Book, based on words of Saint Augustine:

Eternal God,
the light of the minds that know you,
the joy of the hearts that love you,
and the strength of the wills that serve you:
grant us so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may truly serve you,
whose service is perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.