

# Freedom in Christ

## The Epistle to the Galatians

Trinity 5 – 26th June 2016

### **GALATIANS**

I'm very grateful to the reader of our first reading this morning, who resisted the temptation to look at particular members of the congregation as she read out Paul's long list of vices!

We heard there from Paul's letter to the Galatians, which is a sustained and passionate plea to the churches he has planted in an area that is now central Turkey.

Like many of the letters, it is extremely early – perhaps even before 50AD – earlier than the Gospels – and that's why as each of the epistles comes up over the summer, I want to focus on each one, outlining its origins and main themes – because nothing else brings us closer to the world and life of the first Christians and therefore to Christ himself. Though they might seem strange and remote at times, their struggles are not so different from ours, and they have much to say to us.

We will look at Colossians, Hebrews, Philemon, Timothy and Thessalonians – but today is Galatians, a letter that we know for absolute certainty was written by Saint Paul. In it, he describes his own authority as an apostle, and has some very sharp things to say to a group of Christians who he believes are abandoning the Gospel because of false teachers who have persuaded them to go back to keeping to Jewish Law – he even accuses them at one point of being hypnotised!

Paul's response to this, and indeed the theme of the entire letter can be summed up in one word – FREEDOM

### **WHAT IS FREEDOM?**

*'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!'*

You'll recognise these words of Martin Luther king from his famous speech in Washington. Just imagine if the black people of the United States had gone back on their hard-won freedoms and voluntarily submitted to segregation once again? That is

what Paul believes the Galatians are doing by submitting to the Jewish Law from which they were freed.

But Paul's analysis of freedom is not simple, it is not to do whatever you want. It is not an *'opportunity for self-indulgence'*, but involving becoming *'through love, slaves to one another'*. It is not the ability just to make lots of choices in life – but something much much deeper – it is the freedom to BE.

## **CHRISTIAN FREEDOM**

This is the distinctive nature Christian of freedom as described by Paul – it is a state of being that overrides your outward circumstances. Paul uses the challenging metaphor of slavery – *'become slaves of one another'* he says. In a world that did not have the concept of fundamental human rights, slavery was an existential issue. Slaves were not just people in bondage – they were lesser people with fewer rights.

The radical nature of Christianity was its sweeping away of that distinction between people. Your outward state might remain the same, but through faith you were set free in your inner being by Christ. It was not a justification of slavery, but its subversion.

As far from our own world as this might seem, we are almost all of us enslaved in one way or another. The rich feel trapped by their possessions and the rat-race of money-making. The poor are enslaved by lack of opportunity and by feelings of resentment and despair – I'm talking about our own nation, not somewhere far away.

We are all still in desperate need of the freedom of the Gospel in which we become slaves only to one another in love.

## **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?**

The irony is that most people see Christianity, and religion in general, as the opposite of freedom. As William Blake put it:

*'Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds*

*And binding with briars my joys and desires.'*

They see it as a restriction rather than a liberation.

A box rather than the breaking of boundaries.

Too many people – even some of them Christians – see God as a great big bully in the sky who tells us what to do – this infantile idol must be banished from our minds and replaced with a God who is the source of freedom.

Like the Galatians, we live in a culture that has rejected the freedom given to it in Christ, and instead sought freedom elsewhere. What has it found?

The so-called freedom of the free world has been mistakenly interpreted as the freedom to make consumerist choices. That is an aspect of freedom, but it is far from its entirety, and it has not provided the happiness it promised. We are like the teenager who desperately desires to be alternative, but suddenly discovers he is dressed in the same fashion as all his friends. The freedom to live in exciting and radical ways has been swapped for the illusion of choice.

## **FREEDOM OF CHRIST**

What is the alternative then?

On the night before he died, Christ seemed to have few choices, and none of them were good options. But he acted creatively, grasping his betrayal and making of it a gift. His death is both what he must do and what he most freely does. The paradox of Christ's freedom is that in losing it, he finds it, through his self-offering in love.

Our lives are not as free as we might wish. Perhaps we must care for an elderly relative, a disabled child or a sick spouse. We may be in a job that we dislike or a marriage that is difficult. In these situations, freedom is not necessarily about having alternatives or the option to simply walk away. We cannot always change our outward circumstances, but we also needn't be trapped by them. In these situations, Christ teaches us that our freedom consists in embracing our reality and making of it a blessing, loving as much we can to discover the freedom that seemed impossible.

Freedom is not what you have or the choices you make – **it is the person you are.**

For me, nothing sums that up better than the story of Maximillian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar imprisoned in Auschwitz. In the summer of 1941, three prisoners escaped from the camp, and the Gestapo decided to kill ten prisoners in return. When these were lined up, Father Kolbe saw one of the men whom he knew had a wife and children – and so he stepped forward and took his place. He was executed instead. To all intents and

purposes Kolbe was imprisoned, but in that spontaneous act of love he was completely and absolutely free.

## **EU and ORDINATIONS**

This last week has been a very difficult one for our nation.

Many people are greatly distressed and hurt at the outcome and response to the Referendum – including those who voted to leave the EU. In this context, the words of Saint Paul that we must not '*bite and devour one another*' seem extraordinarily appropriate.

In one sense, we seem to have exercised our freedom – a right to choose – and yet it seems to me that, somehow, the whole debate and indeed even the final choice, was a failure of political imagination, and in so doing limited our freedom, by presenting us with a banal and simplistic dichotomy that has divided us all.

Through the anger and fear of this last week and for the future, one thing has brought me great hope and joy.

Yesterday morning I watched as 19 men and women were ordained as deacons at Southwark Cathedral, and in the afternoon 6 priests at a church in Paddington.

Ordination, perhaps more than anything else epitomises the freedom that Paul speaks of and which Christ modelled for us. It is a free choice of an individual, but it is also the submission to a call. In responding to that call, those men and women revealed the liberty of the Gospel, which is not to do whatever we want, but to be who God has called us to be.

It is the freedom to do the will of the Father.

To be slaves of love for one another.

This is the freedom of Christ that the ordained are called to show in a special way but as Saint Paul reminded the Galatians, it is the calling of every single Christian.

It is your vocation too, and it is too precious to be forgotten or given away.

'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery'

*Fr Stephen Stavrou*