

St. Aidan's West Epping, 30th June 2019

FREEDOM AND THE SPIRIT

(2 Kings 2:1-14; Ps 77:1-2,11-20; Galatians 5:1,13-26; Luke 9:51-62)

We live in days when freedom is highly valued. Of course, there are many kinds of freedom. Teenagers are expected to push the boundaries in search of freedom, but too often the quest for freedom leads to disaster or tragedy, perhaps linked with drugs or alcohol. Others seek freedom in their sexual lives, or the freedom to pursue their own particular goals and desires, regardless of the consequences. Once again they so often hurt themselves or others.

And of course, other freedoms are major issues in the world today. Freedom from oppression and injustice. Freedom of the press, and its limits. In America, the freedom to bear arms, especially in a country where there seems to be so much gun violence. And currently, a big issue is freedom of religion, and what limits there might be to it.

The reality is that there is no such thing as absolute freedom in this world. We are not free to do whatever we want to do. We have our **own** physical limitations. Life throws up barriers which stop us doing many things we might otherwise choose to do.

And often the things people want to do conflict with the law, or what people might call "morality". I am not free to drive my car at any speed wherever I want. I am not free to physically attack someone with whom I am angry – except perhaps on a football field! (Although even in that sport there are limits!) I am not free to walk out on my marriage partner and think that's OK.

We live in a world with other people, and it is not right to let our freedoms intrude on the freedoms or rights of others. And of course, we live in God's world, and he sets limits on our behavior, our use of our freedoms. What then is Paul on about when he tells his readers in the churches of Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free"? Surely God's purpose is to restrict our freedom, and to get us to do the right thing: he can't be interested in encouraging us simply to do whatever we want!

Paul's idea of freedom is in fact rather different from that. He recognizes that we are never totally independent people. Ultimately we can choose to serve God, or we can serve Satan. In fact, when we selfishly serve our own desires, putting ourselves first, we are really serving Satan. We will find true freedom by living the life for which we were made by God. Selfish living by contrast is ultimately self-destructive.

One of the big issues in Paul's Letter to the Galatians is the place of the Law of Moses, and where it fits in our relationship with God. People have often tended to think of God's law as a stepladder to God. Climb the ladder and God will be pleased with you, and accept you. Fall short and God will reject you. It is a commonly accepted idea that the way to God is by being good enough, or righteous enough, or by doing enough good deeds.

But that is not the message of Paul, nor is it the message of the Bible. The law rightly understood is a guidebook, not a stepladder, not an obstacle course, not a high-pressure exam. It shows us the kind of life that pleases God: the kind of life we will live if we believe that God loves us; the kind of life we will seek to live if we believe that he knows what is best for us and for others, and if we believe that he has our best interests at heart. The Law does not show us how to reach up to God: it shows us how to walk in fellowship with the God who made us and loves us and welcomes us.

As Christian believers, we know that our relationship with God does not depend on how good or how moral or how virtuous or how religious we are. Despite the views of some people, it doesn't even depend on how precisely correct our doctrine is. It is based on God's love for us, expressed above all in Christ, whose death sets us free from the need to earn our way into God's favour, from the pressure to be good enough for God.

In a good marriage, the relationship of the husband and wife is not centred on a list of rules which each has to keep: and if they are not kept, the erring partner will be evicted from the relationship. Surely a good marriage relationship is based on mutual love and care, including apology and forgiveness when it is needed.

So it is with God: the value of the law is that it points us to the pattern by which we live in relationship with God. When we fail, it does not threaten us with rejection, but calls us to confession and shows us the way forward. As I said, if we see God's law as a set of rules to be obeyed in order to be acceptable to God, it will enslave us: if we see it as an explanation of the way God wants us to live **as his people**, we can follow it without fear. We are free and secure in our relationship with God.

Paul tells us that Christ has set us free. Of course he does not want us to start doing our own thing, going against God's ways, trading on the idea that God will forgive us anyway: that is a distortion of Paul's message, which he regularly had to correct. **Real faith is lived out**: it is not an excuse for ungodly living. In fact Paul says here that true Christian freedom is **freedom to love, and therefore freedom to serve**: to love and serve God, to love and serve our neighbour, to love and serve one another.

And how can we do that? As we trust in Jesus, God is at work in us through the Holy Spirit. We have the Spirit of God within, prompting us in the direction God wants us to go, helping us to become the people God wants us to be.

Christians are not perfect: far from it. Certainly the Galatians were not perfect. There are clear indications here that there were destructive arguments going on: people trying to dominate each other and control each other. People were not treating each other with love but with arrogance and with the determination to be on top. A very human failing. And we still have that side of us which tells us to do what we want, even when it is not what God wants. We want our way, whether or not it is God's way.

Paul calls it "the flesh": we are not too far wrong if we think of "the flesh" as simply our self-centredness. He tells us not to be controlled by the flesh, and he gives a list of ugly things in which the flesh is very obvious. The flesh is not just about sexual misbehavior: Paul's list includes a rejection of true worship in favour of superstition and false religion; there is that terrible slavery to alcohol and the pursuit of riotous pleasure; and more than anything else he spells out different aspects of lovelessness, which sets people against people in many different ways – jealousy and division and fighting and hurtfully competing. You see it in the newspapers and on TV every day. People hurting each other rather than loving each other.

But there is a better way: we have God's Holy Spirit within, at work in us, helping us to become the people God wants us to be. And the character he seeks to develop within us is described as **fruit**, the fruit of the Spirit. And what beautiful fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control! Isn't that what we want to see in the people we know? Isn't that what we want to see in ourselves?

And of course this fruit will lead us to live the sort of life that pleases God, and brings blessing to others. God's laws show us the practicalities of living the Christian life, but it is the Spirit who will help us to choose that way. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings us new life in Christ: He is also the One who shows us how to live that life, and strengthens us to put it into practice. And while doing this consistently will sometimes be tough, and while it may be demanding, it will be pleasing to the God who loves us, and it will bring blessing to us, as well as others.

Through Christ we are set free to please God and serve people, without having to be perfect, without trying to work out whether we are good enough. Let us ask the Spirit who is at work in us to develop within us that sort of freedom: freedom to live and to love and to serve in the name of Christ. Amen.

Paul Weaver