

Fifth Sunday after Easter, 10 May 2020

“A DIFFERENT KIND OF FREEDOM”

(Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5,17-18; 1 Peter 2:11-25; John 14:1-14)

Freedom! Everyone’s waiting for it. That time when we can again go out when we want to: to visit our family and friends without restrictions, to go out for a meal or to go to a show – or even to the football; the freedom to do our work under normal conditions, or perhaps to go on a holiday. Freedom for mothers to get together with **all** their families on a special day like this! Freedom to live our lives as we choose.

But is this all that freedom is? And is there ever really total freedom to live our lives as we choose? Surely any human freedom has its limits. There are things that I might **want** to do that I will never be capable of doing. There are experiences I might really like to have, but I know they will never be possible in my circumstances.

Freedom always has a context. We live in a world where the freedoms **I** might want intrude on the wellbeing of **others**. The much-demanded freedom to bear arms in America intrudes on the freedom of others to walk the streets or to go to worship or to a show or to school without fear of armed violence. My claimed freedom to go wherever I want during the COVID-19 pandemic without any precautions intrudes on the possible safety and welfare of those with whom I might come into contact.

Right now in Australia there is also the tricky issue of religious freedom, which is so important. But how do we uphold **this** vital freedom in such a way that it doesn’t cause harm to others through discrimination or injustice, or through what is experienced as hate language or hurtful treatment? **It is** a delicate balance. Is there a better way of thinking about freedom?

In the scriptures we have a different way of thinking about freedom. And it seems strange in many ways. For **we** naturally think of freedom in terms of the lifting of restrictions and limitations: being able to do whatever we want. But the scriptures are not just concerned about us being **free** from the power and penalty of evil: they also point us to a **new** way to be free. It’s not just “what are we **free from**”? It is very much “what are we **free for**?”

Peter in our New Testament reading gives us many challenges about how we should be living: what he says is not easy. But in the middle of his challenging exhortations, he tells us to “**live as free people**”. Now this passage is certainly not about doing whatever we feel like, whatever we want to do. Yet Peter says: “**Live as free people**”.

In fact he increases the challenge by saying: “**As servants of God**, live as free people”. What sort of freedom is there is being a servant? We need to remember that real freedom is not just “freedom **from**”, but “freedom **for**”. We see this in many circumstances. The kid who is so much looking forward to school holidays, but then quickly becomes bored. The person who looks forward to retirement, but then finds life is empty because they haven’t thought through what to do in retirement. The prisoner who is released, but isn’t equipped to take on a new life. The revolution that overthrows a bad government or ruler, but ends up replacing it with something or someone even worse.

Real freedom needs a direction and a purpose. And the Lord who made us, who knows us through and through, and who perfectly loves us, is the one who knows the way to **life that is true life**. If we live as he leads us we shall find the life for which we were made: we shall find real freedom, freedom to be who we were meant to be - freedom which is truly satisfying, rather than an empty self-centred freedom. To serve him **is** perfect freedom. As Peter says later, we are set free from sins, so that we might live for righteousness. Through Christ we are set free from slavery to sin and self-centredness, so that we can live a truly human life. But a truly human life is not necessarily an easy comfortable life. After all, the life of Jesus was far from being an easy comfortable life. We are his followers, and if we wish to follow him, we know that he calls us to take up our **cross**, not a glass of champagne. Our Gospel reading from John 14 reminds us that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the way to God: he is the bringer of true life. If we truly trust him, that trust will lead us to follow him day by day. And that means we link up with God’s purposes for us and for his creation.

This mixed-up world doesn’t just need reforming: it needs **transforming**, and as Christ’s followers we are called to play our part in God’s great plan for a transformed creation.

The lives we live, the prayer we make, the witness we share, the service we offer: they all play their part as we move closer to that day when Christ will return in glory, when all that is evil will be dealt with, and when this old creation will be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth. And our freedom in Christ enables us to share in this wonderful hope: this new creation of righteousness and love and fulfilment.

As Peter reminds us, we are aliens and exiles: **this** world is not our true and ultimate home. Our loyalty as human beings is not simply national or political: our supreme loyalty is to our eternal Creator and Saviour.

And as we are set free to play our own small parts in preparing the way for the Lord's coming, we have challenges to face and opportunities to grasp. For the world is still a mixed-up place, a place where evil and ignorance and confusion still hold sway. The way we live expresses the hope we hold in Christ, and our lives can bear witness to the good news of Christ. But our witness won't always be appreciated or understood.

Nothing new about that. We heard the story of Stephen's martyrdom for bearing witness to Jesus Christ. He lost his life for really telling it like it is! And in the days when Peter was writing this letter, people were suspicious of Christians and the church.

Stories were going round that Christian gatherings were parties with deviant forms of sex, as well as cannibalism. Why? One of the terms Christians used for their gatherings was "love feasts": what might that mean to suspicious people? Christians spoke of each other as "brothers and sisters". They consumed the body and blood of Christ. And they were seen as destroyers of families, because Christians now had a new family, a new allegiance.

At times there was active persecution, as Christians were pressured to declare that Caesar was Lord. Some no doubt regarded this declaration as an empty bit of show to keep the system happy, something which had little significance: but others saw that to even formally say "Caesar is Lord" was to deny the true Lordship of Christ. But anyone who refused to go through this "patriotic" ceremony would be viewed with suspicion, and at times subjected to severe punishment. It wasn't easy to be a faithful Christian.

As Christ's people we are free in a different way from what the world thinks of as freedom. We are set free to live a life of meaning and purpose and love. So Peter in our passage sets out how this works in practice.

He tells his readers to **abstain from the desires of the flesh**. We probably realize that in the New Testament the "flesh" is not simply a sexual and sensual thing. It is our self-centredness, that desire to please ourselves rather than put God first. So Peter is calling us to get our priorities in order. It is what **God** wants, not what I want, that matters in the different parts of our life.

Peter says to **live good lives**, to conduct ourselves honourably. We know that the truly "good life" is not the life of wealth and luxury, though of course we need to remember that most Australians do live in wealth and luxury compared with people in many parts of the world. But those around us ought to be able to observe our actions and our character, to hear our words, and say "That's an good person". We ought to be examples in our society.

Part of the problem in today's society is that the Christian church's shortcomings have become much more obvious than its strengths. Its failings get much more publicity than its loving service of so many people. Many people want to catch the church out. They seem to want to believe the worst about Christians. Peter knew all about that too.

In our day, the church's failure to deal with appalling examples of sexual abuse of children and of women undermines the message of the Gospel, and encourages those who are eager to demonstrate that Christians are hypocrites. **We** cannot control people's reactions and prejudices, but we can seek to be holy, without becoming "holier than thou".

And then Peter calls us to **submit**. In verse 13, he literally says to "submit to **every human creature**". And I think he actually means that, rather than simply talking about human institutions. We are all humans and we are all creatures of God, made in his image. But Peter calls us to submit to others. Remember that Christian submission is not all about working out who has the power. It is **choosing** to put others first, rather than putting ourselves first. It is about loving and serving.

To submit to others is really putting their wellbeing ahead of our own agenda. And hence, as Peter says, we are to submit to the legally established government, even when we don't agree with it: we are to pray for the government, and also pray that governments will not force people of faith to choose between obeying them and obeying God.

And of course, we are in particular to **love one another**, as members of Christ's family. And I am thankful for the many examples I have seen and heard of members of our Parish family showing caring love to one another in these difficult times.

And Peter tells his readers, most of whom were probably slaves, to **willingly and faithfully serve their masters** – even those who were unjust and unreasonable, and sometimes even violent. Of course Jesus himself accepted extreme injustice in bringing us forgiveness and salvation.

True freedom then is found in **loving service**, not necessarily in ease and comfort. It is being ready to be caught up in God's wonderful and loving purposes. Jesus is our leader, our shepherd, our Saviour. And he is therefore uniquely qualified to be also our example. Let us keep following **his** path of faithfulness and loving service, which is the pathway to true freedom. Amen.

Paul Weaver