

Proper 8

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 26 June 2022

Galatians 5 vv 1 & 13-35 and Luke 9 vv 51-end

Freedom is precious. But it's something that we can understand at different levels.

During our fortnight away from Guernsey, which included some work commitments in England, Judy and I had a week abroad, the first for three years. For me, that was an experience of freedom at several levels. Freedom from routine. Freedom from the tyranny of emails. Freedom to relax and be anonymous. Standing on the deck of a boat in warm sunshine, enjoying the sun and the movement of the boat and the view of the mountains was liberating and refreshing.

But freedom has a much deeper and more profound meaning than the enjoyable, but rather superficial, holiday freedom I have described.

Holiday freedom is precisely that. It is freedom to escape the restrictions and obligations of everyday life. It cannot be brought back into the routine of home or work. I enjoyed watermelon for breakfast on holiday. It was a wonderful treat in a hot country. It wouldn't taste the same on a cold winter morning.

The most obvious meaning of freedom is the ability to do and say whatever we want, without interference from any authority or institution. But life is not so simple. Our holiday, like everyday life here in Guernsey, was full of constraints. Not least, the necessary constraints on our freedom when we came to board the plane on the way home. Our freedoms are always in tension with the freedom of the people around us. When we think of our neighbours, freedom isn't just the ability to do whatever we want, especially if that action puts our neighbours at risk. I might want to light a bonfire to dispose of garden rubbish, rather than paying for it to be taken away. But my exercise of my freedom could have serious repercussions on a neighbour, whether because they had just hung out the washing to dry or because they suffer from severe bronchial problems which are exacerbated by bonfire smoke.

Even as Christians, we may be tempted to define freedom through the lens of our society and culture. But freedom is older than any modern nation-state, no matter how wonderful it may be to live there.

In the New Testament reading today, we find these words: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' The freedom St Paul writes about here is in contrast to the 'yoke of slavery.' Sin is slavery because we lose our freedom to do good. In our sin, our failures crush us. The more laws we break, the more the law breaks us. We become discouraged with our lack of progress. We find ourselves unable to be the kind of people we think we ought to be. In sin, we are locked into a trap, unable to do anything but repeat the same cycle of failure, shame, trying harder, and more failure.

Jesus set us free on the cross, embracing us, just as we are, in our sin. Our enslavement to the cycle of self-destruction is forever broken as we share his broken body and drink his shed blood. We are free in Christ. We are free to do good things, and not to indulge our desires to control other people or have power over them. Each of us is free in Christ to be for the world what he was for the world: an agent of reconciliation and love.

St Luke tells us, 'When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.' Jesus was walking into a death-trap, and yet he set his face towards Jerusalem. He knew what he was getting into, and yet he moved toward Jerusalem because he had the freedom to love. Jesus was determined to love the whole world, including the people who actively rejected him. This is the ultimate freedom, the freedom to love those who do not love us. The ultimate freedom is the freedom to love our enemies.

Freedom to love our enemies is empowered by the Holy Spirit; it cannot come from our own willpower or self-determination. We can practice this kind of freedom when we are filled with Spirit and begin manifesting the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Only the truly free can live out these fruits.

The image of freedom we find in the letter to the Galatians, 'For freedom Christ has set us free,' is this image of the fruits of the Spirit. When we experience the freedom to practice the fruits of the Spirit, we become a blessing of freedom to everyone we meet. This is the freedom we were created to experience, and it is the freedom that Jesus calls us to today. 'Come, be free,' Jesus seems to say. 'Follow me, and you will bless the world with your love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'