

Sermon.2025.06.29 Third Sunday after Pentecost

When we hear in the NT of slavery, as we do in the epistle, we need to remember that this advice is being given in a slave society; an economy based on slavery. Most of the first Christians who heard this message were in fact slaves. It was an experience of slavery to which they'd been consigned, and which governed every moment of their waking lives, life-long. The householder in the ancient Mediterranean world had absolute power over the slave. In the Jewish part of this ancient world at least there were some concessions: a day off every week, and the possibility of release from slavery every seventh year – though whether this was ever actually implemented is unknown.

So how can Paul write 'do not submit again to a yoke of slavery;' 'For freedom Christ has set us free?' How can such people as the Galatian recipients of this letter know freedom? The Galatians, by the way were a group of people indigenous at that time to what's now central Turkey, and who spoke a language related to that of the Gauls in what's nowadays France and the Gaelic-speaking people of Britain. Whether they were ethnically related is an open question, but they were at least linguistically related. These people had accepted the gospel, but in their enthusiasm or naivete had decided, or been persuaded, that they needed to accept the whole of the Jewish law. Paul is telling them that this is simply substituting a new form of slavery for the old. The law of Moses, which had been so distinctive of Judaism and

had been a real blessing in all sorts of ways (just read Ps 119 some time if you've even in doubt about this), becomes slavery in the hands of these former pagans, now called to freedom in Christ. No matter what their social situation may be, as a conquered and colonised people, they have been given a unique form of freedom – if they can only accept it. It is a freedom from all these rather unpleasant tendencies they can see only too clearly in their social betters – supposed betters:

'fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.' Paul is telling the Galatian Christians, a colonised Indigenous people, – you see these behaviours all around you, all the time – and while you may be slaves, these behaviours are the real slaveries. And you are free of these. Or rather, you have been set free of these, so don't go backwards; don't enslave again yourselves to either the old law, or your own old behaviours. The ones who do – even the pagan aristocrats considered leaders in your cities, these are the real slaves. Don't emulate them; don't be like them.

But there's another problem, isn't there, when we look at the gospel. Jesus here, and in many other places in the gospels, appears to be incredibly imperious in his demands on the people he encounters: follow me; if you love me you'll do what I say; and here in today's gospel

One person says: I want to follow you, and he replies: go away; and to another, who is also willing to follow and who's been called to follow, he says don't even go home first for the burial of your father.

How can this be freedom? The only way I can explain this to myself is by thinking the law of love, a Paul calls it, is either an oxymoron or a paradox – in other words, that it's ridiculous, a contradiction in terms; or else that it's a truth so well hidden that it requires us to see another level of meaning buried within it. In this case, the paradoxical truth that 'through love' we can 'become slaves to one another.' And furthermore, that this is actually, despite appearances, an exercise of freedom. We don't have to be self-serving, grasping, fractious and all the rest, governed by our passions and desires; that we can say no to these – and in doing so assert our own essential freedom. This is not something we have to wait for (like our possible release from social bondage or slavery or disadvantage) – it's something we can do, whatever our social situation, right here and now.

And as for Jesus' imperiousness in the gospels: let's look beneath this as well, in the light of who we claim him to be. Certainly he very often acts like a man of his own times, as indeed he must if he's to be fully embedded in those times and in that place, but maybe also he has an insight into people's motivations that enables him to advise them in their best interests: You want to follow, but I can see already that this

is not where your heart lies, that you'll be wanting to leave soon enough; or, I'm calling you to drop everything and follow, here and now, but in asking to go home and bury your father first you are telling me that you're not ready; and that's fine. Go and bury your father. But I'm telling you, that's not the way to find life – so when you're ready, if you're ever ready; call me, text me, send me a message on insta or What's app. And we'll talk then.

It seems to me this is the freedom that love gives us; and the God of love is a God who waits for us. But in the meantime, assert your freedom – for it is to freedom that you are called, brothers and sisters.