

What does Christianity have to say about ... Freedom?

(Churches Together in Berkswell and Balsall Common, Lent Breakfast 2018)

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone ‘it means just what I want it to mean – neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many things.’

As the philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote ‘Freedom is so porous a word that it could lend itself to almost any interpretation.’ So, what freedom looks like depends on the lens through which one is looking. The lens through which I have been invited, by Mark, to look is neither a philosophical one, nor a political one, but a theological and Christian one – though of course these categories are not hermetically sealed, they are more in the nature of a Venn Diagram. What is the Christian understanding of freedom? What does it have in common with other understandings of freedom and what is unique about it? Before we come to any distinctively Christian perspective and as a way into that, I want to raise some questions and make some comments that may have some purchase for those of any faith or none.

Where do we hear the ‘F’ word used the most? Perhaps in ‘the land of the free’ where so many freedoms are vaunted including, the Second Amendment, the freedom to bear arms or to carry a gun. In 2017, 33,000 Americans were shot and killed by fellow Americans and 77,000 seriously wounded. That is, on average 301 Americans killed or seriously wounded by fellow Americans every day. In the first weeks of this year nearly 2,000 people shot and killed and 3,500 seriously injured. Every year the fatalities include many schoolchildren, as in Florida earlier this month. What does this have to say about the meaning of freedom? Do such factors add to the public good and the freedom to live in safety for example?

The word ‘freedom’ in the west, and most especially in the USA, is so imbued with patriotism that it has become an ideological weapon of war. It defines insiders and outsiders and allows for the demonization of outsiders. We might think of George Bush (43) coining the phrase the ‘axis of evil’ and when invading Iraq, using the word ‘Crusade’. This aggressive action in the name of ‘freedom’ led, inevitably, to brutal aggression against Christians in Iraq and destroyed the precarious freedom they were previously able to enjoy. This invasion by the Christian west, which was the narrative, was the best possible recruiting sergeant for radical Islam. Freedoms destroyed in the name of

freedom. When I was in Syria, I met many Christian Iraqi refugees who showed me the death threats they received, 'If you don't convert to Islam, we will take and rape your daughters, burn your houses and kill you.' This and other tragic consequences flowed from a so-called free country acting in the name of freedom.

But of course it is not only the USA, we too – and indeed many other countries – have, in the name of freedom, killed, oppressed or enslaved others.

Let's move for a moment to literature. What does freedom look like? When William Golding's boys are shipwrecked on a desert island in *Lord of the Flies*, they find themselves free of any restraints or laws. This freedom lasts precious few days before hierarchies of domination and oppression ensue. This freedom from external restraints or law becomes anything but freedom especially to the weakest. Freedom demands law. We might also say the Rule of Law, equality before the law. Talking of equality, in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, when Mr Jones the farmer, is chased off the farm and the animals take over, the mantra of the new regime is 'All animals are equal'. In this purportedly egalitarian world, however, it soon has to be recognised that 'Some animals are more equal than others.' Which takes us perhaps to Soviet Russia, the USSR.

The great writer, Solzhenitsyn, a voice crying in the wilderness, was imprisoned by the Soviet regime for his critique of the corruption and oppression of Communism, for his exposure of the brutal suppression of dissent and the Gulag forced labour camps. Those in the west lionised him for his trenchant critique. When he was expelled in 1974 from the Soviet Union, he went to America. There he spoke out about the moral and spiritual vacuity of a country in the grip of rampant consumerism and greed. The very people who had applauded his critique of communism soon rejected him.

The topics for your Lent Lectures would form a wonderful Venn Diagram. Why? Because Democracy, Tolerance, Equality, The Rule of Law, each of these plays an invaluable part in what we, irrespective of our faith position, in a western liberal democracy, might call freedom.

So, having started on a wider canvas, let me now home in on some core and sometimes, distinctively Christian understandings of freedom. There are many Christian perspectives on almost everything, but I want to start with what most Churches that recognise each other as Churches would affirm. What is seen as orthodox with a small 'o' though this would include of course 'Orthodox' with a

large 'O'. Let's start at the beginning. Genesis ch.1 and John ch.1, begin with 'In the beginning'. In the beginning God. God is an agent. God acts. God acts because he chooses to act, both in Creation, as in Genesis and in new Creation, in and through Jesus Christ.

God is free. Human beings, male and female are created in the image of God, who is free. God's freedom is unlimited. Human freedom is a gift of God and an essential part of 'Personhood', of what it means to be human. This freedom, though is limited by heredity, environment and what the Church has called 'the Fall'. The freedom to choose is innate in every human being but it can be –and is -reduced or distorted by forces outside or inside ourselves. Despite this, it can never be destroyed because it is part of the image of God in us.

We have been created free. Free to make choices. We are created 'responsible'. In whatever way we understand the Adam and Eve narrative, it expresses the freedom given to humanity to trust and act on the Word of God, or to ignore or reject God's word. Created free in the image of God who is free, God in his love never violates our freedom to reject him. Love cannot compel love.

This freedom to choose, is underlined in John's Gospel, where we read God, in Christ, 'came to his own and his own received him not, but to those who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power (*exousian*- here can mean freedom) to become children of God.' In Christian understanding, freely to choose the will of God leads to a greater freedom, 'the glorious liberty of the children of God'. 'For freedom Christ has set us free'. To take it out of Christian language, for a moment, to choose the good, to choose that which serves others, to choose that which comes from love, to choose to give, to choose these things over egotism, to be selfless not selfish will not bind us will not damage us but will release us. It will bless both ways, the giver and the receiver. Equally, we are free to choose to be selfish, to do what is contrary to the will of God. This, as the narrative of the 'Fall' (Gen.3:1-20) reveals, leads to less freedom it leads to alienation, to guilt, fear, blame and shame. Human history, to this day, attests to the violence and oppression born of the abuse of human freedom. Experiments on what makes for human wellbeing have been conducted in Universities in USA, Harvard and Canada, Vancouver, and reported on in Warwick. They all reveal that giving leads to a greater sense of wellbeing than taking. Giving to those in need rather than spending everything on ourselves will lead to a truer and deeper sense of wellbeing. These

experiments in the secular world (though to the Christian, the sacred/secular division should not apply) confirm the most fundamental Christian doctrine of all, that we human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, who is love and the Giver of all gifts. So to give and to love is to become more fully those whom we are called to be.

This inalienable freedom to make choices exists irrespective of the political circumstances in which we find ourselves, though these circumstances should themselves be of concern to Christians to the extent that they do or do not allow for the exercise of human freedoms and rights. For example, even in the circumstances of captivity and oppression, those incarcerated or oppressed have a degree of freedom in choosing how to respond to those circumstances. We might think of St Paul and Silas singing and praising God while in prison. We might think of Nelson Mandela, choosing to retain an extraordinary dignity and courtesy in the face of years of brutality in Robben Island prison. We might think too of Fr Maximilian Kolbe in Auschwitz (1941) or of Mother Maria Skobtsova in Ravensbruck (1945) each of whom chose to offer their lives, to die in the place of another. I think of the Dean of Kaduna who was telling some of us how one of the churches was burnt down by so-called Muslims. The next day the people of the Church gathered around the smouldering ruins and praised God. Bringing this closer to home, we may be in circumstances of adversity, serious illness, for example, but we have at least a degree of, freedom in our response to our circumstances.

But what is or might be distinctive about Christian perspectives on freedom? The whole narrative of the Scriptures through Old Testament and New Testament is about slavery and freedom. Maundy Thursday, the Passover meal and the readings remind us of this trajectory from slavery into freedom. Freedom from slavery in Egypt, then freedom from the slavery to sin. Jesus is the new Moses, the Liberator who comes to set us free. This is what God does, through Moses and then through Jesus. God sets his people free.

But this freedom – and this part is crucial – is not simply freedom *from*, it is freedom *for*. The people of Israel are freed *from* their oppression in Egypt in order that they may be free *for* the worship and service of God. This indeed is the very plea of Moses to Pharaoh again and again. The Lord says to Moses ‘tell Pharaoh to let my people go, *so that they may worship me.*’ (Ex.8.20) Freedom is given not simply to escape bondage but to do something new, to enter another dimension of life. The New Testament testifies to the liberation

Jesus comes to bring, liberation from self-interest and egotism, liberation from those things that bind us, that have a hold on us. Augustine writes in his *Confessions* 'I am sucked back to my habits and find myself held fast.' In Orthodox language, we need to be released from the 'passions' within us that can take a hold of us. Very similar to what the western tradition would call the seven deadly sins. The sin behind all sins is the sin of pride, which so easily blinds us from those sins that have a grip on us. It is an interesting exercise to ask yourself which of the seven deadly sins do the adverts on TV or the colour 'supps' play on? Lent is an opportunity to make space for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to reveal to us those things that have us in their grip, those things that inhibit our own freedom in Christ and thus our freedom to share in his ministry of liberation.

For freedom Christ has set us free, to share in the life of God who is free, free in the movements of the Holy Spirit to be fellow workers with God, *synergountes*, to be in synergy with God. We are set free to share in God's work of setting others free. We are freed to free others, reconciled to reconcile others, made whole, to make others whole. This is what we are freed *for*. So that we can share in the anointed ministry and mission of Jesus 'to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

The paradox in the Christian faith that it is always counter-cultural is that the way into life is through the doorway of death. At the heart of Jesus' teaching is the call to lose our lives to find them. On Mount Athos, I read on the wall of one the monasteries the words 'Unless you die before you die, you will die when you die.' Just so do we find that the way to freedom is through the doorway of obedience. Jesus said 'If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.' (John 8:32)

Coming back to the beginning, one of the desert fathers, Diadochus of Photike, (5th cent.) reflecting on our creation in the image and likeness of God writes 'everyone retains the image of God, but only when we attach our freedom to the freedom of God, do we recover the likeness.'

I'll finish with John Donne's words to God: and then a prayer of St Augustine.

*Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free.*

O Lord, the light of the minds that know you, the joy of the hearts that love you, the strength of the wills that serve you, Grant us so to know you, that we may truly love you, so to love you that we may freely serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom. Amen

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24th February 2018