

SERMON – 4/2/24
'Slavery and Freedom'

1 Peter 2:11-17

“Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves.” (1 Peter 2:16)

There is something very deep-seated about the human desire for freedom. If there is anything at all that is constraining us – be it something physical like a locked door or a high wall or something less tangible like the expectation that we will sit still and listen while a minister addresses us unchallenged for 15 minutes on a Sunday morning – we may have a strong urge to try and break free. I am put in mind of dramatic scenes in films like *Braveheart* or *Cry Freedom* where characters like William Wallace or Nelson Mandela give voice to the longings of a whole people subjugated by powerful forces of oppression, and stir the hearts of the audience as the music swells and the revolution takes place.

Of course it is not just human beings who long for freedom. Just picture the struggle of an animal or bird trapped up and desperate to run free, or think of Paul's words in the letter to the Romans that speak of 'the creation itself' being 'liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.' (Rom.8:21) There is something primeval and universal about the desire for freedom and a resistance to being enslaved. So what does it mean to be free indeed?

So far in this first Letter of Peter we have taken hold of God's transforming call to us and God's many promises to us and God's building of us together as living stones into a spiritual temple in which God lives by the Holy Spirit. There has been a lot to celebrate in reflecting on what God has made us in Christ, but now the baton is being passed to us to work out the significance of our salvation in this world where we are described as 'strangers and exiles'. Unusually for a New Testament letter, we turn quite quickly here from doctrine to practice, from what we are taught about God and about the Gospel to the difference our faith must make in the way we live our lives. And the theme of

today's short passage hinges on those themes of slavery and freedom.

So what is it we are enslaved by and what does it mean for us to be set free. Peter leads our thoughts in a number of different directions in this morning's passage and I'd like to take a few moments to reflect with you on these now.

The first thing that Peter addresses is an aspect of slavery that many of us would perhaps not immediately think of as such, namely our sinful desires. Much of the time we don't even recognise that we are enslaved to sin. Every time we hear news of violent crime or senseless destruction and people suffering in the world we lament the brokenness that characterises our humanity, and yet we tend to point the finger over there somewhere, unaware of the fingers point back at us. We quickly point out the speck of dust in the eye of our fellow human beings whilst blithely ignoring the huge plank in our own eye. The apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, gets to the nub of the matter when he so honestly faces up to the reality of the human condition. "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing." (Rom.7:18-19) The reality is that every single one of us is enslaved by sin and a net contributor to the world's problems. Paul concludes: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Rom.7:24) But having acknowledged the reality of his slavery, he proclaims the good news of the Gospel of Christ in whom we are rescued, redeemed, no longer in slavery but set free from sin and death. "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom.7:25)

If we are to experience the freedom of the children of God we need to be honest about our woeful natural human condition and if we are to experience the reality forgiveness we must acknowledge and turn away from our sin. As the apostle John writes: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

But what an outcome that freedom then compels in us under the propulsion of the Holy Spirit. Here Peter exhorts us in words that are very reminiscent of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us." (1 Peter 2:12)

What Peter teaches here is not only that in Christ we are set free from sin but that in Christ we are set free to live a radically new life that will simply astonish those who are still without hope and without God in the world. Are you free, or are you still in slavery to sin? Step out of darkness into the light; leave those chains behind and live the glorious freedom of the children of God.

But the second thing that Peter lays before us is something that is perhaps rather harder to get our heads around – the idea that Christian freedom may actually appear quite constricting to the external observer. He calls those he is writing to (and that must include us) to 'submit themselves to every human authority'. Surely some mistake! Doesn't that sound like a kind of slavery all over again – the kind of thing that we celebrate William Wallace and Nelson Mandela for leading people out of? How can it possibly be that Christians should comply with the governance of worldly leaders many of whom fall very far short even of the standards set in this world, never mind the standards of the Holy One?

The point that Peter is making is that if you take strength from the fact that God is in control in the world then you must also acknowledge that God is the author of all authority and that where there is no authority there is anarchy and despite the appearance of total freedom there is actually total slavery to the worst excesses of human sinfulness. Worldly authorities may not always do things the way we as Christians would like to see them done and they may not always act in a way that glorifies God, but while many of our fellow Christians around the globe have an unbelievably tough time of it living as strangers and exiles in this world, Peter teaches here that by our 'doing good' we will 'silence the ignorant talk of foolish people' (1 Peter 2:15). His teaching of the Christians of his own day, that also holds true for Christians today, is uncompromising: "Live as free people but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves; show

proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor." (1 Peter 2:16-17) In other words, never mind other people, *you* seek first God's Kingdom, *you* let the reflected light of Christ in you shine for all to see, and just see what *God* will do with that for good in the world.

We have to remember that the emperor to whom Peter was referring was Nero, one of the worst of all Roman despots, who increasingly as his reign unfolded would consign countless Christians to slavery, to prison and to execution, so we cannot say that the apostle was writing in a context where worldly power was being wielded in a particularly benign way. The fact of the matter is that even in situations where worldly powers are relatively gentle, Christians are going to stick out as being different because we are living free from the shackles of the world's ways – remember the apostle addresses this letter to those who are 'strangers and exiles' in this world – so regardless of the human context in which we live we are called to live distinctively, seeking to honour God in all that we are and all that we do

In a moment, we will sing words by Scottish writer George Matheson that bear some deep reflection as we sing them. 'Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free'. Matheson echoes a phrase in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer that speaks of knowing God 'in whose service is perfect freedom' which in turn echoes an expression of St Augustine, 'whom to serve is to reign' and a promise that comes first of all from the lips of Jesus Himself: 'If the Son set you free, you shall be free indeed.' (John 8:36)

If we are to experience true freedom, then we must yield ourselves to God in Christ, willingly accepting the shackles of His love for us which, far from limiting us, actually unlock for us life in all its fulness. "My will is not my own, writes Matheson, till thou hast made it thine; If it would reach a monarch's throne, it must its crown resign."

"Live as free people," says Peter and without a hint of irony or paradox he goes on: "Live as God's slaves." Right there is the secret of real freedom – it is in yielding the driving seat of your

life to God and submitting your will completely to the lordship of Christ. Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!