

Sunday 22nd August 2021 – Luke 13:10-17 ‘Set free’

This week our news has been dominated by the events in Afghanistan, and rightly so. I suspect many of the images are ones that will stay with us for some time, and whatever the future holds for that nation, the very least we can do is pray and find active ways to help relieve the suffering of the innocent. What is also notable is how the narrative of freedom is one being used by both sides. For one side, freedom from a hated outside influence; for the other, freedom for individuals – and especially women – to improve their futures.

I suspect most of us listening today will fall firmly on one side of that narrative – but if nothing else, it reminds us that the idea of ‘freedom’ is both a fundamental part of our human longings, common to all people across every culture; and also that what constitutes real freedom is hard to pin down.

Freedom is also a foundational concept in the bible. The key word ‘redemption’ – which we sang about just now, and which appears more than 60 times in the New Testament – means to buy a slave their freedom, and became one of the main ways to understand what Jesus did for us on the cross.

But to really understand what the bible defines as freedom, we have to understand the things that cause us *not* to be free – the things which bind us or hold us captive. In the bible, this basically comes down to two things: the flaws and compulsions of our own human nature, and the evil spiritual force which lies behind them, a fallen angel usually referred to as Satan or the devil.

To be free we have to understand what we most need to be free *from*. And it is the power of evil manifested either through ourselves or the devil which defines the landscape of the true battle for human freedom. **Freedom is ultimately the capacity to live as God designed us to live** – spiritually, emotionally, mentally and even physically whole. Perfect in love and holiness, enjoying unbroken intimacy with God the Father, Son and Spirit. All other forms of freedom are effectively sideshows to this bigger biblical vision.

This biblical idea of freedom underpins Jesus’ ministry. God’s Messiah was eagerly expected for hundreds of years as the freedom-bringer, culminating in Zechariah’s famous song at the start of Luke: ‘Praise be to the Lord... because he has come to his people and set them *free*.’ Jesus himself talked about freedom repeatedly: two of his most famous sayings in John are: ‘The truth shall set you *free*,’ and the more wide-ranging, ‘If the Son sets you *free*, you will be *free* indeed.’

And in today’s passage Jesus addresses the issue of true freedom again. In fact, we see Jesus tackle two forms of captivity which stop us being free – indeed the same two forms of captivity we observed earlier as being the main obstacles to freedom in the bible. The second is obvious and we’ll come to that in a minute. But let’s not miss the first, and that is **the power of self-righteousness as a form of captivity**. Jesus was engaging with two people in this encounter: the woman who was healed, but also the synagogue leader who criticised what Jesus had done.

In common with most of Jesus’ encounters with religious leaders, the problem was not that they cared about living righteously (which they evidently did) but that they had lost sight of the heart of what righteous living was about. They were so concerned about being scrupulous with tiny details that they missed the point of what the original law was meant to be. The Sabbath was a great example: the point of having a Sabbath was to allow everyone to rest and to have extra time to spend with God and each other.

Sabbath was designed to prevent the power of greed taking over every corner of our lives, or exploiting others to do so; it was never about stopping people from doing good, only stopping people making money (or forcing others to help them make money) every day of the week. And Jesus exposes the way that the law was now being misused. How can it be wrong, he argues, to do good – indeed, to do God’s work – on the Sabbath?

There’s a lesson here for us, too. Elsewhere Jesus gives some very wise advice about attending to what’s in our own eye first, before we point out the speck in someone else’s eye. If we want to live in true freedom – in other words, in that deep and satisfying intimate relationship with God – we need to watch our own hearts first, before pointing the finger elsewhere. That’s not to say we don’t challenge wrong behaviour, but let’s be sure that we’re free first. *(If you’re watching online, take a moment to pause the service and ask God to reveal anything that like that for you.)*

The second form of captivity is much clearer in the text, and is the one which prompted Jesus to heal the woman he met. But let’s tackle the thorny issue head-on, namely the way that the text describes this condition as being caused by a spirit. In the West for the last couple of centuries, it was customary to dismiss this as the way that a primitive society described some form of physical condition, and that of course we know better now. But more recently, we’ve come to a much better understanding of how the body, mind and spirit of a person are all inter-connected, and feed off each other.

In a way, we’ve always known this: when we get anxious, we feel sick; when we get stressed, we get a headache – our emotional state produces a physical outcome. It’s not so far-fetched then to consider that a serious and permanent form of this might indeed produce permanent physical side-effects. Maybe these ancient writers have more wisdom to teach us than we gave them credit for.

As always, the key is balance – it is foolish both to assume all physical ailments have some other root, just as it is foolish to assume all ailments are only ever physiological. **We need wisdom to discern one from the other – just indeed as Jesus does.** The New Testament is careful to distinguish between physical and spiritual ailments, so it is telling that Jesus diagnoses this one as spiritual, some form of oppression which manifested itself in a physical ailment, and he treated it as such, with immediate results. If only we followed Jesus’ example and invested more time in discerning one from the other today.

But, as I close, let’s return to where we started and indeed to where Jesus finishes: namely that we were created to live in freedom, and the work of the kingdom of God is to lead human beings into that freedom. Jesus came to set us free – and every healing described in the New Testament is a manifestation of that deeper truth. Here, someone who was in captivity for 18 years was, to use Jesus’ words, ‘set free’ – and this is what Jesus comes to do.

One day, we will all be completely free – spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and even physically. But until then, we seek signs of the freedom of the coming kingdom. Today’s passage gives us two pointers to freedom: in our thought lives and in our spiritual lives. May God grant us grace to search our hearts and minds, and may the wonderful, powerful, healing grace of Christ keep leading each of us into true freedom. Amen.