

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 3 Year C 2019

It will come as no surprise to you, but words and their meanings change. Language evolves and so it should. It can just sometimes be hard to catch up when changes occur so rapidly. Our language today is full of words that have changed meaning. For example, 'myriad', was once used to mean 10,000 rather than just 'a lot' as it does now. Once 'hussy' simply meant a housewife, not the woman of disrepute it now implies. 'Awful' now means something terrible. But it used to have religious overtones, when it meant reverential fear of God, as in 'filled with awe'. So, words - and their meanings - change.

When words change their meaning all the *associations* those words have carried with it also change. Think how our understanding of a word like 'love' or even 'marriage' has changed. Our understanding has changed for these words and so have all the associations with those words. And we see that same difficulty around changes in meaning around the idea of 'liberty'. Liberty (and freedom) we might easily say are values we aspire to, that are worth protecting, that are a valued feature of our life and culture. Notions of liberty also feature heavily in our religious history and our faith. But it is worth asking ourselves, then, that if liberty and freedom are so highly valued, then what are we *free from*, and what are we *free to do*? When we ask *that* question, we will see the big gap between a Christian understanding of liberty and a secular, contemporary understanding of liberty.

In the world we inhabit 'liberty', as one commentator has recently put it, has ended up meaning little more than freedom to shag and to shop... Liberty worth 'fighting for' is often argued as freedom from patriarchy or freedom from out of date moral codes, or freedom from religion or societal expectations or familial obligations, free from all responsibility even. When we talk about liberty it tends to be rather tame and middle class... But in the face of the likes of ISIS and Boko Haram, and the fact that there are more people living in slavery today than at any time in human history *combined*, we see that for millions of people liberty remains literally a matter of life and death. And it just shows how self-obsessed western notions of freedom really are.

That they are self-obsessed, though, is actually the point. Because liberty in our culture *is* usually understood as personal autonomy: free for you to do what you like, free to choose, free to fulfil any and all of your personal desires. And so, anything that impedes or frustrates personal autonomy must submit to the rule of freedom and choice; freedom and choice taking on an *absolute* quality. *Nothing* can challenge it in the value system around us. The strange - indeed cruel and deadly irony - is that so often the choices settled upon lead to further enslavement, to diminishment of human dignity. When once liberty was seen as enhancing human dignity so often now it leads to addiction, violence, sexual depravity, the wilful killing of the unborn and sick and elderly. So often our choices - the freedom we so value - leads to death. The ideal of liberty makes a good servant but a very poor master. When the ideal of liberty is allowed to dominate, to rule, to subjugate all other virtues and values we see it does not lead to human flourishing - to life - but rather death.

In the Christian vision of things, though, liberty is understood quite differently. When we ask the question, *free from what and free to do what?* there are some very different answers. In Christian faith we classically answer the *'free from what?'* question as free from sin, free from all that alienates us from God and each other, free from all that deprives human kind of its flourishing. And *'free to do what?'* we can say free to become what God created us to be; free to worship which is our highest destiny; free to enjoy the life God intends for us. So, *God* becomes the focus. God becomes the object. God becomes the reference point. God becomes the place in which true fulfilment is found and in which true peace lay.

Liberty is of course one of the strong and recurring themes of the Bible. It is part of the wider context of the first reading today and a central part of the gospel. The dramatic action in both the Old Testament reading and Gospel is the same: the prophet Ezra reading the book of the law; Jesus in the Synagogue reading from the prophet Isaiah. The first reading from Nehemiah tells an important part of our religious history. Ezra and Nehemiah were part of the small band that returned to Jerusalem after 70 years exile in Babylon and who set about to rebuild the city walls and restore the temple.

As we hear it today one of the first acts of this *newly freed people* is to hear the law read out for them, so that they might commit - as a people - to the covenant once more. They realise that their new-found freedom is not an excuse to do as you like or to go back to doing what they used to do. It can't be business as usual. In the biblical story the Babylonian captivity is seen as a result of Israel turning its back on God, a result of refusing to obey his law and thinking they had better ideas. Seeking to be free from God, they found themselves enslaved by a far more terrifying master. So, Ezra reminds the people that if they wish to remain free, they must set their sights on God. This is why the rebuilding of the temple was such an important project. Freedom for the person of faith is freedom to worship. It reminds us that the *highest* dignity of man is to worship his creator. It's not an accidental afterthought. True worship reveals our ultimate destiny and our ultimate dignity.

Whereas the first reading exhorts the returned exiles to renewing themselves once more to the covenant, in the gospel we hear how that is fulfilled. The blessings of God's presence, the fruits of the covenant - *good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the downtrodden* - is fulfilled in Jesus. Once more *it is not our efforts* - it's not a programme of social improvement, it's not a socialist utopia which fulfils these things, but Christ! Submitting to the rule and law of God is where true freedom is found. It is the joyous paradox of the gospel: that in allowing Christ to rule in us, we are truly free.

We cannot expect an easy time in this. Our prideful, selfish self is pretty resilient and so often seeks to reassert itself. And the powerful trends of self autonomy as the principal value of our culture will continue to grow and so continue to diminish our culture, leaving a terrible destruction in its wake. But for faithful Christians who maintain the rule and law of God as the source of our true freedom, then *we* will be signs of hope, *we* will be a refreshing alternative to the rule of self-autonomy, and *we* will be the needed remedy to the unravelling around us. And the blessings that Christ fulfils in himself - of true sight, of healing, of true liberty - will be ours, and ours to share. Amen.