

**Pentecost 5**  
**27/6/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**2 Kings 2:1 - 2, 6 - 14**

**Psalm 77**

**Galatians 5:1, 13 - 25**

**Luke 9:51 - 62**

Sermon preached by Rev. Duncan Watson

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“For freedom Christ has set us free.” That is how today’s reading from Galatians began and in that letter of Paul freedom is the central idea which sums up a Christian’s place before God and in the world. Freedom underlies Paul’s argument through Galatians. It is central to what Christians receive through the justifying work of Christ. It is the primary gift of the Spirit. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (3:17).

Freedom is not something that stands alone, self-created. I realised this especially in the late 1960s and 70s when, contrary to much opinion that radical students were rebelling against their parents, investigations revealed many had parents whose liberal outlooks they simply took further, even to their logical conclusion. In other words the rebels’ radicalism had a solid basis.

Whatever you make of that, according to Galatians, the freedom of Christians is based in Christ and his love. He is the foundation who gives us the security to be free. As Paul has written earlier in the letter, “And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in (or by the faith of) the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” (2:20) Now, one Galatians’ commentator writes of “the overwhelming *presence* of Christ” to the believer. I am not sure if the word “presence” is strong enough. After all, Paul in Galatians writes of being “in Christ”, or says that those who have been baptised into Christ have “clothed themselves with Christ” – I tend to prefer the former translation of “put on Christ” – or again Paul writes that Christians “belong to Christ”. All these ways of putting it suggest a very strong grounding in, if not an identification with, Christ – a “union with Christ” as John Calvin would have understood it. However we may understand it, to be in Christ, that and that alone is the basis of your and my freedom.

Now, Paul’s understanding of freedom may help us to understand that somewhat problematical reading from the gospel of Luke this morning. The reading begins: “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” The words “to be taken up” echo the reading from 2 Kings today where Elijah was taken up to heaven, although, it must be said, Jesus repudiated the suggestion of the disciples that he “do an Elijah” on the unfriendly Samaritans by consuming them with fire from heaven. That is what Elijah did in the chapter prior to our 2 Kings reading, an event to which the Authorised Version on which many of us grew up refers. But for Luke, like Elijah Jesus is on his God-appointed way to his death, resurrection, and ascension. This why Jesus sets his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem, which is from now on a motif for Luke. Jesus must be about his Father’s business as he explained to his parents when he was a boy in the temple in Jerusalem. Now he is on his Father’s way to bring salvation to the world.

It is in this pursuing of God's purpose that Jesus says "follow me" to potential disciples and rejects their wish to bury the dead first, or to say goodbye to their families. He ploughs straight ahead, to employ the imagery of his last saying in the reading from Luke. I am reminded of a typical prayer of John Calvin in which he wrote, "Grant we may turn aside neither to the right nor to the left, but depend wholly on Thy Word and so cleave to Thee that no errors of the world may lead us astray," a thought which echoes many Old Testament passages such as Deuteronomy 5:32. Now, with my rather timid ways I have a certain admiration for and envy of a person who can do that without swerving. Yes, adherence to God and his way is the ultimate loyalty of the Christian, and for Jesus God was his only true security, as his crucifixion will demonstrate. God was the basis of his freedom, of his ability to set his face steadfastly for Jerusalem and not be turned aside.

However, the indifference shown in this reading to the dead and the family was and is offensive and creates a problem if such a reading is allowed to stand alone. For we know from elsewhere in Luke that Christ's freedom, based in his Father, is also a freedom to love, as we have heard a few weeks ago when we read of Jesus' compassion for the widow of Nain, and in frequent other examples of his active concern and care, notably for the leper.

In order to find the right balance we need to return to the reading from Galatians where we read, "For you were called to freedom ... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." The freedom which God gives us is not an invitation to indifference or wilfulness. It is a freedom to love. The freedom we are given is derived from the loving God through his Son in the power of the Spirit. As Paul has written earlier "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' " so that we become children and heirs of God.

And the freedom which the Spirit of Christ brings leads to what Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit", that is, the virtues which he lists. Now when I was looking at this list I remembered a comment and a person which have made their mark on me. And that highlighted two of the virtues for me, a rather arbitrary choice I must admit. Those two virtues were kindness and peace. Years and years ago in my youth I remember my father in a sermon making a typical remark when he referred to what he called "that great English word kind." And kindness, as we learn in the letters to the Romans (2:4), Ephesians (2:7) and Titus (3:4), is not just a human virtue but is also characteristic of the very nature of God. In being kind we are reflecting God's nature. And on the matter of peace, my former teacher, Professor George Hendry, a sturdy Barthian if you know what that means, clear in what he believed and taught, pointed the way for me that I hope I do not lose too often. It was this. In a world where theology and theologians are often combative it is well to remember that peace must also be a characteristic and virtue of theology and theologians. So our freedom must reflect the kindness and peace of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Let me elucidate a bit more. First kindness. Way back in 1964 I returned to Australia as I had not departed six and a half years before because I came back with a South African Afrikaans speaking wife, Tertia, and two small children. Now those were the deep dark days of apartheid in South Africa and a common experience for my wife was that when she met someone they would launch into a discussion of apartheid. I remember this included my former history teacher from school days. It became a little wearing. One day, some months after we arrived, we were visited at the Parkville manse by the Rev. Alf Dickie, a well-known pinkie, if not red for some, a peace marcher and peacenik, a man who was no lover of injustice. I introduced him to my wife, and his first words to her were, "How are you settling in, my dear?" Ever since that day for Tertia the sun rose and set on Alf Dickie. A great man, Alf Dickie. It was an unusually kind remark from a person free in Christ. It was an act which shames some intemperate would be prophets.

Then, George Hendry wrote a book on the seventeenth century Westminster Confession of Faith. In this book he discussed the doctrine of double predestination which the Confession taught and to which my Reformed and Presbyterian tradition adhered for many years. The doctrine claims that before all time God predestined some to be elect and some to be damned, and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was very loosely related to the doctrine. For many people this created uncertainty about salvation, and doubt because of the obviously arbitrary nature of God's love. Christians defended it ferociously. Furthermore, as Hendry pointed out, the doctrine was surrounded by "an air of dread and doom." Hendry wrote that not only was the doctrine unbiblical but that the tone was all wrong because the very proof texts that the advocates of double predestination used do not suggest dread and doom but in fact a tone of exultant joy, exemplifying what has been called "truth that sings." So the *tone* of how we discuss things and do theology is all important, and joy and peace which come first right after love on the list of Paul's virtues set the tone. In this regard, some years ago we visited friends in South Africa, a minister and his wife, and on the sitting room wall was a large frame containing a German sentence of Karl Barth woven into fabric. The words were, "Theologie ist eine frohliche Wissenschaft" – Theology is a joyful science. Yes, indeed, and joy and peace need to be always part of any discussion.

The freedom of the Christian has its outcome in virtues such as joy, peace, and kindness. How can it be otherwise when, as Paul writes in Galatians, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me? Freedom goes astray, as Paul indicates in his list of the chaotic "works of the flesh", when we are self indulgent. However, freedom works in love when you and I look to Christ and remain in him. Our weekly worship is the major occasion when God gives us that opportunity through his Spirit.

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