

Sermon preached by Trevor on Ash Wednesday (6th March) 2019

I must confess, I grow tired of hearing about freedom. Tired of having the word bandied around or touted in media reports of one sort or another, about one situation in the world or another. Usually with the implication that 'freedom' is an unquestionable good, something to be craved, sought, and enjoyed to the maximum, something the political and economic conditions for maximizing which are to be pursued above all else and, when promised by some political group or another, always likely to win votes.

But most of this rhetoric is vacuous, empty, unthought through. We tend not to bother thinking about what freedom means because talk about it is so common and so familiar that we suppose we already know, though, if pressed, my guess is that few of us who haven't had to write an essay on it at some point could come up with even a half-decent stab at defining it.

If we did – if we stopped and mulled it over, and came up with a short account of what, according to those who bandy it around in our society, 'freedom' is all about, then my guess is that it wouldn't be long before the word 'choice' cropped up in the sentence. Freedom, we tend to suppose, is all about choosing: about stripping away the things that threaten to prevent us from making certain choices, so that can choose *for ourselves* what to eat, what to watch, what to study, what to buy, what to enjoy, what to prioritize in life, what to do, what to *be*. It's all about 'self-determination', to use the technical phrase, even though it may not be obvious that we are in the best position to determine anything. It's about 'making our own mind up' about things, even when, as one long-suffering academic puts it (in relation to large classes of newbie students) we may not have minds *worth* making up yet! It's about getting what we *want* (so long as no one else gets hurt along the way). And our culture encourages us to suppose that freedom to choose what we want is our right, our God-given right: and then invests itself in supplying endless options of things from which to choose, all available to enjoy ... at an extremely attractive price (but you'd better buy soon while you have the chance, or you might miss out!!).

Even religion buys into this consumerist model of what it is to be human. Whether or not to be 'religious', whether or not to be baptized, or to pursue some alternative religious path, or to stand back from religion altogether, and proudly 'self-identify' as atheist or agnostic: all this, we are encouraged to suppose, sometimes by the church as well as by our society, is a matter of *choice*. Of 'deciding' to follow Jesus, or something. Or deciding not to.

Well, I don't want to erase the word 'freedom' from Christian vocabulary, or deny that choosing and making decisions have their proper place in our dealings with God. But the sort of freedom that scripture encourages to expect and to pursue as human beings is not the same sort that our world typically makes so much of, and exercising it is bound up with some very different outcomes to those dangled in front of us by the self-concerned, self-enhancing, self-gratifying, self-advancing and self-determining philosophy of modern consumerism.

In the coming weeks of Lent we are going to be looking together, on Sunday mornings, at the story told in the book of Exodus, a story that begins, of course, with the people of Israel

being set free – liberated, granted freedom from their plight as Pharaoh’s slaves. And it’s a freedom which they celebrate and rejoice over, and is looked back to throughout the whole Old Testament as a defining moment in their relationship with God. And it’s linked to a promise of good things to be enjoyed together with God. But inheriting those good things, enjoying those good things, is anything but a matter of self-determination; it is precisely all about learning what it means to be a people who hand over any supposed freedom to choose to God, and discover the goodness of having God as their Lord and King. And far from being all about choosing what they want, being able to enjoy what they prefer, deciding on where to go, how to behave, who they will be, and so on, the first thing God does is dump them down in the wilderness and keep them there for forty years. There is a land of promise, a land of milk and honey; but there’s no entry into it other than through the shaping experience of wilderness, with its struggle and suffering and self-denial. It turns out to be a hard lesson to learn. But the freedom God grants them by opening up a way through the Red Sea is the freedom to be his people, the freedom to be who and what and where and when God calls them to be. And it’s in that, they finally discover, and that alone that genuine blessing and satisfaction is to be found.

Jesus too talks about and brings freedom; but again, it’s a very different sort of freedom to the sort we’re led to hope for and insist upon as our ‘right’ by politicians, lawyers, the authors of self-help books and anyone else concerned to secure our vote or sell us things. And it’s got nothing much to do with self-determination, self-improvement or self-advancement. And, although there is indeed a point (almost certainly more than one in fact) where we choose or decide that following Jesus is what we will do, we eventually discover that we are not really the ones doing the choosing. God has had his eye on us, and his Spirit at work in us for a long time; and we, rather than Jesus, are the ones chosen; not the ones doing all the choosing. We are not the ones doing the significant choosing (as though becoming a Christian were a bit like being in the queue at Costa or Zest, and deciding to have a flat white rather than a chai latte; or like deciding which football team to support, or what channel to watch, or which websites to click on, or whether to update our profile picture on Facebook. We’re not the ones doing the choosing, and we’re not the ones who are in control, or calling the shots, or dictating the terms. That’s something God does and is doing – and his doing of it is precisely what sets us free from all sorts of things that might otherwise dominate and distort our lives, things which, left to ourselves, we might well choose (especially if there’s no one looking).

And when Jesus sets us free, it’s not just any old freedom that he grants us but, as our liturgy reminds us, freedom ‘to be his Body in the world’. And, like Israel, we quickly discover that this freedom looks very different in its shape and in what it leads to than the enticing and seductive offerings dangled before us during the commercial break or on the Amazon app or the latest bit of colourful publicity from the university, promising programmes and courses that will enable us to become whatever or whoever we choose to be and become. Realizing our dreams doesn’t seem to be on Jesus’ agenda, and it’s not the strap-line for being his Body in the world. Instead, what he offers (in the immediate and mid-term at least) is a wilderness road by travelling which alone the road into God’s kingdom is to be found. And it’s a road lined with crosses, as the roads into and out of Roman cities often were – a dire warning to anyone who might dare to transgress Roman law. Well, for us it’s not a warning or a threat, but more of a promise. A promise that the

way to becoming the Body of Christ in the world lies through suffering and the willingness to have those parts of us that cannot or will not fit into God's kingdom put to death and raised up anew.

Let me close with some words from the Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, reflecting on this very fact: 'I really hate that Jesus' Gospel is so much about death', she writes. 'I hate it. I wish that Jesus' message was, *Follow me and all your dreams of cash and prizes will come true; follow me and you'll have free liposuction and winning lotto tickets for life.* But obviously he's not like that. Jesus says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me". He says, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first," and infuriating things like "if you seek to find your life you will lose it but those who lose their life will find it." And every single time I die to something—my notions of my own specialness, my plans and desires for something to be a very particular way—every single time I fight it and yet every single time I discover more life and more freedom than if I had gotten what I wanted'.