

Freedom in Christ

Isaiah 65:1-9, Ps 22:19-28, Gal 3:23-end, Luke 8:26-39

Forgive me for looking round before I start. I am just wondering if you all look filled with abundant life, if you look like a people set free!

Paul in Galatians says this (excuse my paraphrasing); now before faith came we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. but now that Jesus has come, we have been changed and we are set free from the laws of sin and death. We are clothed in Christ.

The Gospel talks of imprisonment and clothing too. Here we have a man from the city, a man who was probably 'someone' in business at some point, but here he is now, naked, lonely, dangerous and possessed by evil spirits.

I just love the way Jesus deals with this man. Living among the tombs (we have some of our parishioners living in our graveyard), and having been chained up for his own safety, before Jesus reaches him, he has already commanded the unclean spirit to come out of him.

Would we do such a thing in the name of Jesus? Frightening stuff, even though we know we have the power from God to do all that Jesus did and more. The demons plead with Jesus not to send them back to hell, and strangely, and compassionately, instead he sends them into the gentile's pigs. The unclean going into the Jewish unclean to be drowned and ended. This is a powerful image of good over evil, of liberation from suffering and pain.

By the time the swineherds have got over the spectacle of witnessing the loss of their pigs, and had told as many as would listen, this once possessed chap is clean, dressed, in his right mind and sitting at the feet of Jesus.

The crowd was afraid - it must have been like a scene from Harry Potter with the dementors swirling out of the man and into the pigs - who was this saviour? Where did his power come from?

But then we look at the chap who was free. When I read this, I automatically started singing 'And Can it Be - the verse 'my chains fell off, my heart was free', because this is a wonderful and amazing account of what becoming a Christian is all about! Chappy was dead in sin, but Jesus changed his life. I was dead in sin, but Jesus changed my life. You were dead in sin, but Jesus changed your life! No less dramatic in terms of heaven and hell and the power of the Holy

Spirit! We are just like this chap - liberated, not imprisoned and filled with joy.

Immediately after his chat with Jesus, as Jesus turns to leave, chappy begs Jesus to let him go and be a disciple. The answer seems quite harsh, because Jesus sends him away. Not in a bad way, but he send the chap back to the city to tell everyone how much God has done for him - in other words, to bring the gift of freedom to others while he is still on cloud 9!

So what does all this mean for us?

I am going to set you a task for this week to remember how you came to know Jesus, whether it was as dramatic as our Gospel account, or whether you have always known God. Think about the privilege and think about the difference that being in Christ has made to the way you live. Think about how you serve God, because not all of us go off to foreign parts to witness the love of Jesus, not all of us are called to evangelise on street corners, but for all of us here today, and at this time at least, Jesus has kept us in Handsworth. This is where he wants us to minister, and here is where we can grow the church.

We can think - one day we will be taken to somewhere exotic to save souls, but it is here that we are.

So what can we offer? The difference between life and death for a start. Just as Jesus brought freedom

and salvation to the possessed man, so we can bring that same freedom to others by sharing our faith.

We can bring peace - freedom from anxiety

We can bring hope - freedom from doubt

We can bring life - freedom from condemnation

Of course we need to feel these things in our own lives. We shoulnt be like the Galatians who needed reminding that we are not here to follow unnecessary rules and regulations. Of course we live within the law, but we are free to be who God made us to be. And we need to feel the peace and freedom that knowing Christ brings in order to share it with others - we life, and life abundant, why do we forget? Why do we get dragged into the dross of life and lose our cloud 9 hope in God?

A life in Christ means that we also share in his suffering

If anyone knew suffering it was the possessed man. Jesus also suffered the pains of death and hell on the cross, and I believe this man understood those sufferings better than most. We should not be surprised when suffering comes, but we can be confident that it will produce things of eternal value. We can spend our lives fearing pain and suffering, or we can thank God for the times

of reprieve and remember all that he has done for us to be free.