

The root and fruit of freedom (Luke 9.51-62, Galatians 5.1, 13-25)

Pentecost 3

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'For freedom Christ has set us free', Paul writes (in his letter to the Galatians 5.1), and a little later, 'you were called to freedom brothers and sisters... Paul writes with clarity and authority, but how do his convictions square with the sayings of Jesus in this gospel reading, words which sound very different? In Galatians, it's all about freedom and its fruit; in Luke it seems to be about constraint - giving up our freedom. When I read the two passages earlier in the week, I wondered about the decision of lectionary compilers to assign them on the same Sunday? How does the proclamation of freedom relate to the demands of discipleship; and what does it all mean for us? In this morning's reflection, I hope to tease out some connections and implications.

In terms of context, the gospel passage marks the beginning of a new section in Luke's account, it's unique to Luke and often referred to as the travel narrative. In chapter 9.51, Luke writes that 'he (Jesus) set his face to go to Jerusalem'. It's the first mention of this phrase, and it signals a decisive change in focus. From here on, Jesus is resolutely 'on his way', moving into the eye of the storm, and it helps to remember this as we hear his words here.

As John the Baptist had prepared the way for his coming, so now, disciples are sent ahead to prepare his way to Jerusalem. Their first resting point is a village in the region of Samaria, but we're told that he's not welcome, 'because his face was set for Jerusalem' (53).

Last week, I spoke about religious rivalry and how it inevitably leads to divisions and violence, and here we have a classic example. According to Lukan

scholar Robert Tannehill (1996:169): *'Pilgrims passing through Samaria for Jerusalem aggravated the religious controversy between Samaritans and Jews, for Samaritans refused to recognize the Jerusalem temple, having their own sanctuary on Mt. Gerzim'*. Samaritans as a group held deep-seated animosities towards Jews, and likewise, Jews despised Samaritans. That's how it was, how each group had been brought up (socially constructed), and why there was enmity. So, where hospitality could've opened the way for dialogue and understanding, hostility perpetuated distrust and anger.

'Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and consume them?' ask James and John, perhaps recalling some of Elijah's retributive exploits. In other words, let's smite 'em, show 'em whose boss!! NO, says Jesus, turning and rebuking them; and they move on to another village (55). In other words, no guys, let it go, move on, that's not what it's about, not why I came and why I'm going to Jerusalem. In fact, some ancient manuscripts include the words, *'you do not know which spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human being but to save them.'*

Now, here I see a link with Paul's exhortation to live in freedom. Here, as on every other occasion of rejection and ridicule, including his unjust trial, torture and shaming on the cross, Jesus refused to be drawn into the dynamic of retaliation. At the end of the day, acts of revenge and reprisal come from an egoic desire to pay back those who've hurt us. To do so, is not a sign of freedom it's a sign of bondage. Please don't misunderstand me here, this is not to condone hurtful actions, just to remind us that in Christ, the way of freedom is via forgiveness and restorative justice, never revenge or retaliation.

'[E]nmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions...'; these are works of 'the flesh', Paul says in Galatians (Gal 5), not freedom in the Spirit.

Okay, so there's a possible thread between these two passages, but what of the next bit, what's so liberating about the way Jesus challenges those would-be disciples?

Remember, he's on his way to Jerusalem, the place where his determination not to repay evil in kind will be tested to the utmost. As he journeys, preaching and healing, he draws a crowd and receives enquiries from prospective disciples. Now, we might think he'd welcome these potential participants in mission, but instead he seems to turn them off. As a recruitment strategy it seems counterintuitive and counterproductive.

The first inquirer sounds eager and willing; *'I will follow you wherever you go'* (57), but instead of applauding, Jesus sounds a severe warning. *'Foxes have holes, and birds... have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'*. It's not a refusal, but it does cut to the chase. In other words, if you really want to be a disciple you must be willing to surrender your security and desire for a comfortable, settled existence. Jesus knows, as we all do, that words of undying commitment can be cheap. Jesus presents this seemingly idealistic applicant with the prospect of homelessness because only someone willing to endure radical privation will finally persist in discipleship (Tannehill 1996:171).

Well, we kind of get that, Jesus is being honest, realistic. But what of his next two responses? On the surface, these seem particularly harsh. *'Follow me'*, he says to a second prospective participant (59), taking the initiative on this occasion. 'Lord', this person says, 'first let me go and bury my Father'. Fair enough, sounds reasonable, so why this hardness? *'Let the dead bury their own dead'*, he says, *'but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God'*. It's not what I'd call 'pastoral', and I wonder how many people have been offended by this demand? Surely, fulfilling pressing family obligations is an expression of

religious commitment! Aren't we meant to honour our parents (e.g. ten commandments)? Well yes, as Jesus himself says in other places. So, it seems, he's pointing to the need for something deeper, to a more fundamental relationship and obligation. And, maybe what he's also exposing, using shock, is how we so easily deceive ourselves and dress our avoidance of God's call with noble sounding excuses.

In his next response, he continues to confront. *'I will follow you, Lord'*, says a third prospective disciple, *'but let me first say farewell to those at my home'*. Again, it sounds so reasonable, noble and respectful, and again Jesus' response seems harsh. Surely, a farewell to loved ones isn't too much to ask. Which makes me think it's not really about this. I suspect Jesus is actually getting at something less reasonable and noble, namely our predilection to put off doing what God is asking, and to prevaricate - *Yes, I'll do it Lord but first... but first... but first...*

There's no doubt Jesus is being deliberately provocative here, and in a *'me first'/'I want it all'* society like ours, Christ's demands sound draconian and restricting. So, how does this call for radical allegiance square with Paul's claim that Christ sets us free?

Well, let's think for a moment about this notion of *radical*. The Miriam Webster dictionary defines radical as *'relating to, or proceeding from a root'*. Radical surgery, gets to the root of diseased tissue, cuts it all away. It's extreme and uncompromising but also liberating, in the sense that it frees the body for health. Christ demands radical obedience; his call cuts to the root of the things that tie us up and holds us back - our fears and excuses... and under that, my belief that somehow, I must secure my identity, my existence. Radical discipleship begins with rootedness. Where am I rooted? If it's in my egoic

agenda, my wants and desires, my moods and tastes, then I'll find myself avoiding challenging circumstances, driven by conflicting desires, and torn by competing demands. Living my way sounds liberating but is actually restricting, I become a slave to 'the flesh', a victim of circumstance, a competitor for resources. On the other hand, rooted in Christ's call, I'm undivided, unthreatened, free to receive myself as gift, I'm liberated for others - for the adventure of love and all its risks.

Paul speaks of the fruit of freedom, and Jesus's reminds us that true freedom is rooted and nourished in wholehearted self-giving to the call of God. But, it's one thing to exhort this commitment, quite another to enact it. In the circumstances of our daily lives, what does it actually look like? What holds us back from a whole-hearted 'yes'? What could it mean for us to break more fully free of compromise or prevarication?

I wonder if a beginning is simply to let ourselves be present again to our desire for God, our yearning for deeper connection, truth and purpose. Why are we here in church? Why not at home in bed or at Tilley's having breakfast and a coffee? It's not just habit that brings us here. There's something, someone drawing us, like those inquirers with Jesus. But then as we do that, we can also become present to our fears, perhaps an anxiety about what might be asked of us, feelings of inadequacy or guilt about the past, weariness in the present. We've got all kinds of reasons for holding ourselves back, and some we're not even fully conscious of. But some we are, and maybe naming these is a good place to start. The good news is that Jesus wants our company and understands our struggles. At the same time, he doesn't want us to get stuck as mere observers or passengers in the life of faith - '*for freedom Christ has set us free*'. So the invitation remains, insistent and always a little unsettling, to set

our faces ever more determinedly in the direction he calls, really and repeatedly giving ourselves to his uncompromising and liberating way: following... following... following.

References

Tannehill, RC (1996) *Luke*, Abingdon Press, Nashville.