

Galatians sermon series week 6

03/07/16 09:30 St Peter's

I met a man this last week for whom the Brexit vote last week was all about freedom. Freedom to leave behind structures we couldn't control, to regain control of our own country. I'm not sure what I made of that argument, or what you do. In this 6th week of our sermon series on Paul's letter to the Galatians, we hear a lot about freedom. Paul wants the new Christian community in Galatia to understand what Christ's death and resurrection means for them - how it sets them free from the structures of religion.

Freedom is a powerful word. A word that resonates around the world, throughout the centuries to bring hope and inspiration to many who seek it, and to those who enjoy it the desire to protect it at all costs. We are used to freedom in its secular sense - certainly politically and socially. We think of people not living under the rule of democracy as not being 'free'. Those sent to prison are denied their freedom as a punishment for their crime.

Today St Peter's CLT has decided that our collection is going to the charity Water Aid. If you don't know their work they work in some of the poorest and remotest parts of the world. Today, 650 million people live without safe drinking water; whilst 2.5 billion live without safe sanitation. 315,000 children die every year from diseases linked to unclean water. So Water Aid seek to bring clean water, good sanitation, and improve health. In doing so they bring freedom to people - the freedom to live and the freedom to be well. So can I encourage you give generously in our collection today.

But on this St Peter's day, when we gather as the three churches of this parish to remember St Peter and to celebrate the life of this church - I wonder what you think about spiritual freedom?

Last night a good few hundred of us gathered in Christ Church cathedral to witness the ordination of Judith and her fellow Deacons by Bishop Andrew. Ordinations are always solemn occasions, with lots of prayer, but also huge celebrations as new people commit their lives to serving God and enter ordained life. During the sermon, the retired Bishop of Taunton Peter Price reminded those being ordained, and all of us, that our faith is radical. For, in his words, we service a profligate God, who is extravagant in the extreme with his love and desire for the best for us and all creation. Our God goes to all lengths to see his creation flourish. As St John puts it, God wants us to have life in all its fullness. So Peter Price bid the ordinands to pattern their life on this extravagant God and not to have a narrow ministry, but a broad and deep one. To not be constrained too tightly by expectations of themselves or other people about what their ministry entails, but to live the fullness of the faith to which they have been called. Judith - that is my hope, and I hope ours for your time with us. That we'll find ways in which you might flourish here amongst us. Not being constrained too much by what we expect of a curate, or what the training manual demands, or even what your training incumbent asks. But that you might find the freedom in Christ of knowing the call he has placed into your heart, and to which you have responded.

But as we welcome Judith, what might this spiritual freedom mean for us? We remember the context of the letter to the Galatians. The new Christians have been involved in a heated argument being worked out between Peter and Paul. Is the Jewish regulatory system found in the Torah and rabbinical teachings necessary for Christians, or can those from beyond the Jewish covenant be included in Body of Christ? Paul makes a passionate plea to understand the Christians faith as setting us free from the chains of old style religion. When he quotes the story of Isaac and Ishmael (heard in our first reading), he does so allegorically to discuss what he calls birth into slavery as opposed to birth in the spirit. For in Christ he argues we are born of the spirit,

not the old ways that left us in slavery. "For freedom in Christ has set us free" 5:1 he urges the Galatians. What does this mean for us here?

The same question remains - of whether we can be free to live the new live in Christ offered to us? But sometimes, if we're honest it feels just more comfortable to be in slavery to the pattern of behaviour of our religion? We know our religion, and its comfortable ways so well. We do what we do in church - "Its the way we do it here" (the final 7 words of the dying church!). But rather than defining us, these words can limit us in what Paul would call the slavery of religion. Rather, we can be free - to be the redeemed people of Christ, who love God and know of God's love in us and who want to show and tell of that love in the world.

Last night the Bishop introduced the key part of the ordination of Deacons by describing their ministry as bring "heralds of Christ's Kingdom". Simple task then Judith! Judith, we do pray that you will discover that you will find freedom in Christ as you grow in to ministry. But also that you will teach us about that freedom. That you will never hesitate to talk of the Kingdom, and God's love for us. That you will encourage us to be brave, and to take risks for that freedom, as you have. For your calling is to model to us the calling of God to each one us - to be free. For you have been called not collared yesterday!

St John put it like this "You know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" John 8:32. As we go forward together, may the truth of Christ be in our hearts as we grasp the freedom of the Kingdom.