
Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 1 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV)

A story is told of a ship long ago making its way back to Europe after explorations in Africa. Part of the cargo included several exotic birds, and at the beginning of the journey one of the birds began to squawk a lot. It did not like being in a cage. After a while it got too much for some of the crew. One of them let the bird out. The bird flew off. But after several hours of flying over the ocean it couldn't find anywhere to land. Eventually it struggled back to the ship, and panting and breathless, it settled back on to the deck. What was to follow was even more amazing. The crewman who had set the bird free, and the bird, become friends and companions. No longer was the bird like a prisoner on the ship.

How would you describe a life 'totally free'? How would a 'free life' affect your work, your relationships, and many other aspects of your life and thinking?

Some will argue that 'freedom' ought to be viewed in this way: it's the 'freedom' to do what you like, when you like, and in the way you like. In this context, it is also sometimes argued that in order to experience such 'freedom' then a critical frame of thinking needs to be encouraged, whereby information presented ought to be questioned. 'Nothing should be accepted as true for unless you can prove it.'

But are we truly 'free' as people? Are you free to do what you like, when you like, and in the way you like?

The reality is that we all know there are rules and authorities which need to be respected and obeyed. No one really believes the post-modernist message that says 'all truth is relative'. When we hop into our cars and drive home today, we trust that other people will drive on the correct side of the road. We trust that gravity will work and we won't float off into space! Similarly, there are laws in our society (and 'laws' in the life of the church) that we expect others will honour and observe.

What does it mean to genuinely live as members of a community, where there is a true sense of freedom, but at the same time a sensitive understanding to the call to care for one another? What shall be our reference point (your reference point) for determining your beliefs, and therefore values, and therefore attitudes and actions?

When it comes to thinking about how we, as Christians, are called to live in this world, there are some salient words of advice in our Second Reading this day (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). The background to this reading is that in the Christian congregation at Corinth at this time (around 55A.D.), there were people who

knew the Jewish purity laws, and they had been a guide for them in their moral life. Furthermore, there were new converts to Christianity of non-Jewish background. And among these people there were those who had trouble eating meat that had been bought at market places. The reason for this was that these animals had been slaughtered with prayers said to 'idols'. And so, to them, it represented partaking in a pagan way of life. But others had said that these 'god's weren't real, and therefore eating this meat didn't cause them any problems. This caused a debate amongst Christians, and so much so that a special 'Synod' was held to discuss this question (and you can read about this in Acts 15:1-21). The decision taken at this Synod was to ask people to refrain from eating such meat in order not to offend others. But even after some said it didn't matter because these idols weren't real. So they ate the meat. They were indifferent to the personal struggle of others. And they ignored the church's agreed Synodical decision.

Yes – Jesus has said that eating meat is OK (Mark 7:19). This is also confirmed in the vision to Peter (Acts 10:15). But for struggling Christians, the 'eating meat' was an issue because of the pagan context they had come from. This is why the Apostle Paul says, "Be careful, then, that your exercise of freedom does not become a stumbling block to others weak."

Martin Luther spoke about 'freedom', and he did so also from two perspectives. First, Luther said this: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." This is a word that directs us to the person and work of Jesus. Those who have truly felt the weight of 'sin' (that is, a wrong they have done, or a wrong they have felt has been done to them); or those who have felt the weight of sickness or death; and those who often have felt the weight of all the bad stuff going on in the world: of these, so many who have looked to Jesus have often said they have found 'freedom' in Him.

At the same time Christians say that we are not free at all. Pastor Martin also said this:

"A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone." Our Lord, Jesus Christ, has also said, "A new commandment I give unto you: that you love one another as I have loved you." And the Apostle Paul has said, "For the one who was free when he was called is Christ's slave." (1 Cor.7:22)

Certainly none of us is free to do what we like, when we like, and how we like. God's Commandments (as also affirmed and sharpened by Jesus' own teaching) serve as our guide. There are limits to the way we live. If we are sensible we recognise this. That is why loving parents impose limits on children. That is why our country has laws that we are to observe (and when we disagree with those laws, we are to respond in respectful and lawful ways). And, as God's people who want to be self-controlled, we impose limits on ourselves. But there something else important here as well, as so often words become 'weaponised'.

When we examine this passage of Scripture, we must address not only what it says, but also what it does not say. The concept of offending someone is very much abused in our times. If I don't like what you say or do, for whatever reason, then I supposedly have the right to say that I'm offended. People have to be very careful not to offend anyone. "Watch what you say. Watch what you think." But for the record: To "give offense," as Scripture speaks of it, means to lead someone into sin or unbelief. In other words, it is not to hurt someone's feelings. It is to hurt someone's soul, by leading them down a destructive path.

When Paul writes that the exercise of freedom should not become a stumbling block, he does not mean that someone will see you do something, and they have hurt feelings because they don't like what you're doing. He means that you would be leading them into sin. That you should never do. But let us not use this to be shy, or manipulate the substance of the faith. Our faith is one that will cause some people offense. The Cross is a stumbling block. Yet we preach it. The Bible says this is foolishness to those who are perishing. Yet we cling to it for dear life.

Jesus Himself was a stumbling block. He was a constant source of offense for those around Him. He refused to listen to the human traditions. Instead, He upheld the very Law of God, and smashed to bits every attempt to create righteousness by human work, or to weaken the intent of God's Law. He refused to compromise with spiritual blindness that demanded its own way. Instead, He pointed lost sinners to Himself. And for us, this is the heart of the matter.

When we talk about Freedom we remember that it is the freedom that Jesus gives us. A lot of people don't see being a Christian as 'freedom'. They see Christianity as rules that you follow that take away a person's freedom. But when we talk about freedom in Christ, it sure is not a limiting thing, it's a liberating thing!

In the Holy Gospel for this day (Mark 1:21-28) we hear that Jesus' teaching was different from that of any other teacher, because He taught as one having authority. The background to this sentence is that In the teaching traditions of Jesus' day, a rabbi would always quote other rabbis, a scholar would always quote other scholars. But Jesus spoke from His own being. He taught without quoting others or basing His authority on them. And ultimately, here He was pointing to the reality already that He was willing to walk the way of the cross for us As Christians we say we have ultimate 'freedom' in Jesus.

A bird flying over the ocean may think it was trapped. But new friends can be made, and new opportunities discovered. This will happen when we are willing to travel together with other people in a common journey of life. Of course, this may mean some effort on your part. But Christian Freedom is about Christian Love that recognises the need to live and work together. And ultimately, this sense of 'freedom' is based on knowing Jesus and the real life He brings.

When we talk about Christian Freedom the first thing we have to remember is the freedom that Jesus has given us from our sins. We share in the ultimate victory through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection (as the Bible says, when we were baptised). And so we have total freedom in Jesus. God's people know what is meant by this.

Paul reminds us, "There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Corinthians 8:6).). Love knows the true God as our Creator. He made us and all that we have. We live for Him. Why? Because of God the Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Through Him we know God. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He reconciled us to God. Through Jesus Christ we know God and His love, and the true freedom He gives..

Let us always look to Jesus Christ. He who created all, and who possessed all knowledge in heaven and earth, gave up all His freedom. He gave up family and home. When it was necessary, He gave up food and drink for our sakes. He gave up freedom, as He was arrested, beaten, and sentenced. At the last moment, He even gave up His very life. At any time He could have seized His mighty power and stepped down from the Cross. But He did not. He counted His freedom nothing, so that He could make us free. We are free from sin and death, free from Satan and hell. We are truly free in Christ Jesus.

Jesus pointed to a rich promise of freedom for those who followed Him. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" [John 8:31, 32]. Soon after this, the Son of God spoke again, promising, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" [John 8:36]. This promise is iterated by Paul, when he wrote, "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" [2 Corinthians 3:17]. True freedom is in Christ.

God's grace is the foundation of our freedom, a sure gift made available to us again every morning. Every mistake we make is covered. Every sin is forgiven. And my hope is that as we centre our hearts and minds around God's grace, that His forgiveness and mercy open a pathway to true freedom for us today. Never forget that in Christ we are free from sin. And we are freed to love and serve those around us as Christ loved us. Amen.