

# Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2022, Pentecost 3

Readings: 2Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

**Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20**

**Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

**Luke 9:51-62**

When I was at Primary school all the students and staff would gather in the hall for assembly each week. In the same hall we'd also do gymnastics, choir, and musical productions. So, there were climbing ropes hanging from the ceiling, gym mats stacked in a corner, and a well-used piano next to the door. At assembly the piano was played by a teacher called 'Miss Lawrence' and she consistently had her hair up in a 'bee-hive' style, that none of our mums sought to emulate! However, Miss Lawrence could really play that piano...

She must have had some favourite hymns because I am word perfect on a couple simply because we sang them so often! The last verse of one hymn has these lyrics, *'Let faith be my shield and let joy be my steed, 'gainst the dragons of anger, the ogres of greed; and let me set free, with the sword of my youth, from the castle of darkness the power of truth.'* The words are dated, but most of the students seemed to love singing that song, and I don't think it's because we wanted to kill dragons and ogres! I think it was more that we wanted to be part of setting truth free, however ten-year olds understand 'truth' and 'freedom'?

I wonder how you would define freedom? My mind immediately goes to what the opposites of freedom are, and those include bondage, slavery, and captivity. Freedom means that there are choices – while bondage, slavery, and captivity mean that if there are choices they are very limited.

When Jesus is remembered reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel he chose to read a part that speaks about freedom. Let me bring those words to mind, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* In reading this Jesus affirmed that releasing captives and letting the oppressed go free were core business for him, and by implication they are for all who follow him.

The Baptist pastor, Martin Luther King, was inspired by this and brought freedom as a focus to the American civil rights movement. In the conclusion of his famous 'I have a dream!' speech, delivered in 1963, he affirmed that, *"When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"*

So, anybody who thinks that politics and religion should remain separate have not taken seriously the clear focus on freedom articulated in much Biblical writing.

However, there are many kinds of bondage which deny people freedom. Poverty is a form of bondage where people struggle to find shelter, food, and community. Addiction is a form of bondage where the most important thing in life becomes that which satisfies the physiological and psychological craving. That may be a chemical addiction to drugs and alcohol; addiction to gambling; addiction to work; addiction to computer gaming; addiction to approval; addiction to buying things; addiction to exercise... In fact, the human brain seems to have the capacity to become addicted to just about anything!

In this week's reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians he suggests that *'For freedom Christ has set us free!'* We live in a very different context to Paul, so we're likely to have different understandings about freedom. Politically, Paul lived in a territory that was occupied by the Roman army and many resented the taxes that Rome imposed, and the ongoing presence of Roman soldiers enforcing Roman law. But, Paul was not talking about being politically liberated in this letter, he was talking about the destructive inclinations within us that can bind, and make our lives utterly miserable.

I'm going to paraphrase a bit because some of the language he used may seem a bit old fashioned! I think he is saying that when we understand sex to be the most important thing in life, and we use people without giving anything back, we're going to end up lonely, and emotionally bankrupt. And, when we think that possessions and social status are the most important things, we're going to find ourselves unfulfilled, wondering where we went wrong. And, when we allow ourselves to be consumed by jealousy, cynicism and telling lies... it's all going to end in tears!

Paul suggests that the antidote for all of these, and the way to live a healthy fulfilled life, is to allow the Spirit of God to grow these particular qualities within our character: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Now you might be thinking, 'Cam! I'm just not a patient person! Or, 'I get angry easily when such and such happens... it's just the way I am!' and this is a very natural response. But, Paul is suggesting that our character is not set in concrete and we are all work in progress.

I wonder if you're conscious that you're not so strong in one of these? Maybe you're not that loving or kind? Maybe you have little self-control and do many things impulsively? If you are clear about needing to grow in one area then it would be worth taking this into prayer each day this week using words like, 'loving God through your Spirit please make me... more loving, more kind, have greater self-control...' and, slowly but surely, I think others will see positive change in you.

Alternatively, you might be thinking that you want to grow in each of these qualities – I certainly think that for myself! The old hymn ‘Spirit of the Living God’ is a prayer that has this intent, and it was written by the American composer Daniel Iverson in 1926. The familiar words ask, *‘Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me... use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.’*

This sounds like a good way for us to pray together now, so, let’s pray...

Living and loving God, please send your Spirit upon us this day. Where our hearts have become hardened and indifferent to the needs of others – grow compassion and care. Where we’ve become self-centred and self-absorbed - grow generosity and kindness. We make this prayer, and offer our lives to you, in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.