

Freedom in Christ

Galatians 5 v1, 13-end

26th June, 2016

We all woke up on Friday morning to a different world as 52% of the voters of our country made the very big decision to leave the EU. Whatever other things we might want to say about this decision, one thing is clear: we live in a very divided country; divisions run deep between the different regions of the country; between the old and the young; and between local communities and even families. And that division of opinion is not just out there, but also here in church today. No doubt some of us here will be delighted with the decision; others of us will be shocked and appalled by it. The important thing now is to find ways of being reconciled, understanding one another and working together as we move into uncharted waters. So we need to be praying, especially as Christians, for grace and wisdom as we look to the future.

This week, like most of you, I'm sure, I have been preoccupied with the referendum, but I have also at the same time been reflecting on the reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, the NT reading set for today. I hope this reading may cast some light for us this morning. The reading is about *freedom*: 'For freedom Christ has set us free' Paul says. Freedom has also been a key theme in the referendum campaigning. But freedom isn't a simple concept and can mean different things to different people. For some people it's about freedom 'from' – freedom from the shackles of Brussels. But we might also want to ask freedom 'for whom' as one person's freedom might not mean freedom for someone else. And also freedom 'for what?' How do we use our freedom?

We've certainly seen the dark side of some versions of freedom, as in the murder of the Yorkshire MP, Jo Cox. In the courtroom, when her murderer was asked his name, he replied: 'Death to traitors and freedom for Britain'. His violent version of freedom is not, I'm sure, anything any of us here would want to associate ourselves with.

So what kind of freedom is Paul talking about and can that speak to us today? 'For freedom Christ has set us free' he says, 'stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.' Earlier in his letter Paul has been arguing against those in the Galatian church who teach that all Christians should follow the Jewish law and be circumcised. Paul emphasises that it's not the law that brings us into right relationship with God, but faith in Christ. Through Christ we are given the freedom of being a child of God, his beloved son or daughter. We are no longer enslaved by the law; we are free in Christ.

'For freedom Christ has set us free.' But freedom for what? How do we then use that freedom? If we are free from the law does that mean we are free to do whatever we want? Paul tackles this by saying 'You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.' For Paul, freedom is clearly not about just doing whatever we feel like or whatever serves our own best self-interest. In this, his appeal is very different from that of the politicians. On *both* sides of the referendum campaign, appeals were made basically to our self-interest: 'what is best for me and my pocket', 'what is best for my country' with very little reference to how other people might be affected; the most vulnerable in our own country, across Europe and rest of the world.

For Paul, freedom involves a responsibility to look beyond ourselves and to care for others. Through love we are to become slaves of one another, he says. We are to remember that we

should love our neighbour as ourselves, which, together with loving God, is part of the greatest commandment as Jesus himself taught.

We live in a society which emphasises the individual's freedom to choose, but freedom in Christ is about interdependence; it is not about my freedom to choose to do what I want or what I think is best for me without any reference to anyone else. This kind of freedom in fact leads to conflict with others as Paul points out. Freedom to do what 'I' want leads to the 'works of the flesh' rather than the 'fruit of the Spirit' a contrast Paul draws out here in our reading from Galatians.

In talking about 'the works of the flesh' it's important to realise that Paul isn't saying everything to do with the body is bad and everything to do with the soul is good. 'Flesh' doesn't simply mean 'body'; flesh means human life lived without reference to God; whereas living by the Spirit is living life in relation to God. You've only got to look at Paul's list of 'works of the flesh' to realise that Paul is not just concerned about sexual immorality and drunkenness, but also 'enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions and factions.' Something we've seen plenty of in recent days, and no doubt there is more to come.

Freedom to do what we like can lead to all these works of the flesh and we can end up biting and devouring each other as Paul says. Perhaps the freedom we need is not the freedom to do just what we want after all, because that can mean I'm both at the mercy of my own selfish impulses and that I come into conflict with others. The freedom we are given in Christ involves a freedom *from* ourselves; from our own inner compulsions and addictions, our self-centred impulses and our competitive jealousy and resentment towards others. It's not only external situations, or rules and regulations which can constrain us; we can also be enslaved

by our own inner attitudes. I'm sure, if we're honest, we'd all have to admit that there are things in ourselves we don't always like very much, that there are attitudes and actions which we feel ashamed of and wish we could be free from.

We need to be freed *from* our innate selfishness, our addictions and resentments, and lack of care for others and be freed *for* a generous self-giving of ourselves to God and other people.

But how can we do this? It can be a real struggle to resist our own selfish impulses; they are deeply ingrained in us. We are all essentially rather self-centred and see things primarily from the perspective of how they affect me; that's why politicians primarily appeal so successfully to our self-interest. How can we be different and love God and neighbour as ourselves?

Paul says that we need the Spirit. It is only the Spirit working in us that can help us to resist the 'works of the flesh', self-centredness, conflict and division, and help us to grow different qualities – 'the fruit of the Spirit': 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' To produce these fruits of the Spirit is a life long process, it involves the disciplines of prayer and meditation on Scripture, regular self-examination and repentance and the support of the Christian community through fellowship and sharing in the Eucharist. But if we commit ourselves to being open to the Spirit and living by the Spirit, these qualities will grow in us and we will reap what we sow as Paul says later.

So, today, at this time of uncertainty and division, let us pray for the Spirit to be at work in our own lives, in the life of our church fellowship, but also more widely in the life of our

country. May we use our freedom in Christ for the good of others and co-operate with the Spirit in producing the fruits of love, joy, peace and the rest in our own lives. And let us pray that these qualities and values, rather than dissensions, quarrels and factions, may be evident in the wider life of our country too.

Today, all churches in the Diocese have been asked to pray a prayer of reconciliation; a prayer which asks for the power of the Spirit to end discord and bitterness. So let us pray: