

The Way to Freedom Week 1: What is Freedom?

Summary

In this first week we shall:

- + Ask what does *Freedom* mean in daily life and society today?
- + Ask what is *Christian Freedom* and how is it different?
- + Look at some Bible passages to see how *Freedom* is treated there.
- + Ask, is it just a matter of *Freedom of Choice*?
- + Give ourselves something to do now and in the following weeks.

Where to Start?

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Whenever we start talking about *Freedom* we very soon realise that we may be talking about very different things! As a preparation for this first meeting, it would be a good idea for one or more members of the group to go through some current or recent newspapers and magazines with a highlight pen and mark wherever the words *Freedom*, *Free*, *Liberty* or *Liberation* occur. The relevant pages can then be passed round the group for comment, or put up on display.

What do they tell us about 'Freedom' as a value in our society and in the world today?

Or, are there other examples in the news just now, of people or communities who are illustrating 'Freedom', or who are struggling for them, or who are being denied them?

Definitions of Freedom

Here are some dictionary definitions of 'freedom'.

- + The power or right to act, speak or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.
- + Absence of subjection to foreign domination or despotic government.
- + The state of not being imprisoned or enslaved.
- + The state of being physically unrestricted and able to move easily.
- + (Freedom from): The state of not being subject to or affected by (a particular undesirable thing).
- + The power of self-determination attributed to the will; the quality of being independent of fate or necessity.
- + (The freedom of) a special right or privilege given to someone, especially as an honour to a distinguished public figure, allowing them full citizenship of a particular city.
- + Unrestricted use of something.
- + Familiarity or openness in speech or behaviour

If you had to choose, which three of these meanings would you say are most important for you personally, and why?



The fact is, that especially in our 'Western' world, *Freedom* has become so much part

of our everyday language that we are inclined to forget how relatively recent much of its usage is. To a large extent, it took the horrors of oppression and worldwide conflict in the 20th century to make people realise that *Freedom* is not to be taken for granted.

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On 6 January 1941 US President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a famous declaration:

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression -- everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way -- everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want -- which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants -- everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear -- which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbour-- anywhere in the world.'

These sentiments were expanded in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, which spoke of the need 'to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom' and 'the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms'.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' (see above) are freedoms 'of...' or 'to...' or 'from...'. Such understandings of freedom have become deeply embedded in our culture and way of life, although we might well think that more than sixty years later they are still aspirations rather than achievements. Worldwide, Christians and churches have played a powerful role in highlighting them and striving to ensure their implantation in practice and, where appropriate, in law, especially where 'religious freedom' is concerned.

Which Freedom?

Consider these two cases:

(a) There have been several instances in recent years when Christians in the UK have been banned from wearing a crucifix at work, and have challenged this in tribunals or the courts on the grounds of religious freedom. One such case in April 2010 involved a nurse in Exeter who was moved to a desk job after refusing to remove her crucifix at work, and lost a discrimination claim against her employers. She had argued that the cross "ban" prevented her from expressing her religious beliefs. She said it was a "very poor day" for Christians in the workplace", that "the law doesn't appear to be on the Christian side" and that Christians would feel "quite persecuted" by the ruling. (BBC Devon Website 7 April 2010).

(b) In February 2010 Westminster City Council announced it was to outlaw sleeping rough and soup-kitchens for homeless people, run by churches and voluntary organisations, especially in the area around Westminster Cathedral. A Councillor stated: "Soup runs have no place in the 21st century and it is wrong and undignified that people are being fed on the streets. However, soup runs on the streets in Westminster actually encourages people to sleep rough in central London, with all the dangers that entails." (Daily Telegraph 27 February 2010). One church response was "I was hungry and you gave me food - until the Council stopped you."

Are either of these threats
to Christian freedom? How?
Which might be the more serious?



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Bible Input

Let us now look at how 'being free' or having 'freedom' is spoken of in the Bible.

John 8: 31-38 : True Disciples

*31*Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; *32*and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' *33*They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?''

*34*Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. *35*The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. *36*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. *37*I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. *38*I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

Interpretation

Jesus is here saying that it is 'the truth' that will set his hearers free. In John's Gospel 'truth' is not so much a set of abstract, rational statements or ideas about the world and God but rather 'what is real', 'what you are really up against here and now, even if you don't yet realise it'. In meeting and hearing Jesus the people are being challenged to recognise in him the reality of God present and active as His Father, and Jesus himself as God's Son. So the liberating 'truth' is God's own self present here and now in Jesus, inviting people to a new life of communion with God, through trust and obedience to him. This new life with God sets free from slavery to 'sin' – the self-bound life - a kind of slavery that some of his hearers seem unaware of because they assume themselves to be already 'free' through loyalty to their distinctive religious and national tradition over against the occupying Roman empire. Jesus' saying has a special significance in the context of the ancient world. *'At the time when a son inherited his father's property he had special powers to free his father's slaves. Jesus was to enter upon his inheritance as God's Son, through his crucifixion and exaltation. He could really set [his hearers] free; he could give them real liberty – freedom from sin.'*²



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Churches Together in Britain and Ireland



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Do you really think of faith in God as bringing you *freedom*? If so, why is faith today so often seen as bound up with intolerance, bigotry and hidebound traditions?

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Bible Input

Galatians 5.1, 13-21: The Works of the Flesh

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. ¹³Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ¹⁴For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul assumes that a sharp line can be drawn between the freedom of love and the freedom of 'the flesh' (or 'self-indulgence').

Do you actually agree with this?



Or how would it operate in our consumerist society where 'freedom of choice' is prized as a value and where our economy arguably depends on 'choosing what I want'?

Interpretation

A New Testament scholar writes:

'Faith's obedient submission to God's "grace", the acceptance of the cross of Christ, is the surrender of our old human understanding of ourselves, in which each of us lives 'unto him/herself', tries to achieve life by our own strength, and by that very fact falls victim to the powers of sin and death and loses him/herself.

*Therefore, "faith" – as "obedience of faith" – is also released from these powers. This new understanding which is bestowed with "faith" is that of freedom, in which the believer gains life and thereby his/her own self. This freedom arises from the very fact that the believer, as one "ransomed", no longer "belongs to him/herself". One no longer bears the care for oneself, for one's own life, but lets this care go, yielding oneself to be the property of God (or of the Lord) and lives for him.'*³ (Rudolf Bultmann)

But as Paul points out, this freedom is not expressed in sheer 'doing what you want', still less an opportunity for 'self-indulgence' ('the flesh' in older translations of the Bible), but through love be slaves to one another'. Strangely, therefore, the freedom brought by faith brings with it a new kind of 'slavery', that of love in the manner of Christ and enabled by the Spirit.

This has long been recognised in Christian worship. For example the ancient prayer from the Gelasian Sacramentary (8th century), echoing words of St Augustine which likewise find a home in the second morning collect in The Book of Common Prayer:

"Lord God, Light of the minds that know thee, Life of the souls that love thee, and Strength of the thoughts that seek thee; help us to know thee that we may truly love thee, and so to love thee that we may fully serve thee, whose service is perfect freedom."

Or the hymn by the Scottish Presbyterian George Matheson (1842-1906):
*Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
force me to render up my sword,
and I shall conqueror be.*

Can you think of other hymns, poems, prayers etc which express similar thoughts?



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Bible Input Freedom of Choice?

Some would argue that in fact the *'Freedom of Choice'* offered by the market is largely a myth, that the range of options on sale is decided by commercial interests rather than our own felt needs, and that through manipulative advertising we are pressured into 'choosing' rather than deciding for ourselves. In September 2011 a report by UNICEF said that parents in the UK feel powerless before the consumer pressures – 'brand bullying' – on their children. 'Fears about not having the right brand of trainers or electronic gadgets for children meant that parents in the UK, particularly those on low incomes, felt they had to buy these goods, even if it meant getting into debt'. The report describes parents as feeling 'compelled' to buy – even though they knew much of this spending was 'pointless'. Some argue that the freedom multinational companies enjoy to move capital and labour around the world is good because it maximises the generation of wealth which – in the end (they believe) – is bound to trickle down even to the poorest. On the other hand, a campaigner for economic justice and fair trade writes:

"Our society has developed ideas of freedom that include allowing inter-national companies such financial freedom that they avoid paying taxes on a massive scale. Christian Aid estimates that tax avoidance costs poor countries US\$160 billion per year. This is more than one and a half times the global aid budget. Companies shift their profits into tax havens, such as the Channel Islands, and so avoid paying the taxes due in the countries where their profits are being made, often among the poorest in the world. Tax havens allow them financial secrecy, and mean that poor communities lack the education, health care and access to clean water and sanitation that they so desperately need. Governments of countries like Kenya and Bolivia find they are unable to collect enough in taxation to provide these necessities for their people."

Luke 10:30-37

30 Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. *32* So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. *33* But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. *34* He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. *35* The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." *36* Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' *37* He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

This is such a well-known story, almost too familiar, we might think, to teach us anything new. This time, however, take it as a case-study in various understandings of *'freedom'* by using a simple role-play. From your group, get one person each to represent the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, and two or three to represent the robbers. Together they form a panel and will each in turn explain their respective actions in the story, as people who have exercised their *'freedom'* as human beings. Each one begins his/her explanation with 'As a free human being who believes in freedom . . .' But also have someone speaking as the robbed person, for a very final comment on *'freedom'*!

?

*If almost anything
can be justified in the name
of 'freedom', what use is the word?*

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Love ~ Revolutionary Freedom?

Let us look again at Bonhoeffer's 1932 sermon statement which we have used as a headline for this course:

'To be free is to be in love, is to be in the truth of God. The one who loves because made free by the truth of God is the most revolutionary person on earth.'

We don't usually associate 'loving' with being 'revolutionary', so what attitudes and assumptions is Bonhoeffer challenging here?

Can you think of examples of people – especially any known to you or in your own community – who have been 'loving revolutionaries'? How did people react to them?

In the summer of 1939, as war in Europe loomed nearer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in the United States. He had gone there at the invitation of American friends who knew the danger he was facing in Nazi Germany, both as an opponent of Hitler and as one liable to military conscription. He knew it was a privilege to be in the 'land of the free' but soon decided he must return to Germany.

Bonhoeffer explained to an American friend:

I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. My brethren in the German Confessing Church wanted me to go. They may have been right in urging me to do so, but I was wrong in going. Such a decision each man must make for himself. Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.⁴

Bonhoeffer decided to leave the 'land of the free' and go home to live under a dictatorship! Was he giving up freedom, or giving a new meaning to 'freedom'? How would that 'fit' the various dictionary definitions quoted earlier?

To Do

Compose a prayer about 'freedom' for use by yourself, your group or your church for use throughout this Lent.

Carry on looking for statements in the media which illustrate how 'freedom' is being viewed today, so that these can be shared and displayed in your group throughout the course.

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References

¹See John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations*. Christian Churches and Human Rights (WCC 2005).

²John Marsh, *The Gospel of Saint John* (Penguin 1968), p363.

³Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament Vol 1*, (SCM 1952), p330f.

⁴See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Fortress Press 2000), p655;

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*,
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