

The Way to Freedom

Week 2: Discipline

Summary

In this second week, after looking at the first verse of Bonhoeffer's poem *'Stations on the Way to Freedom'*, we shall:

- + Reflect on the way *'discipline'* is important in so many areas of life.
- + Look at the story of Jesus' temptations as an example of discipline and freedom belonging together.
- + Learn something from monastic life about the importance of discipline.
- + Look at wider applications of the notion of *'fasting'* or *'restraint'* in matters as various as church life and the applications of science and technology in human well-being.
- + Give ourselves one specific goal to aim at for the rest of this Lent.

Discipline

If you set out to seek freedom,
then you must learn above all things
Discipline of your soul and your senses,
lest passions and instincts
lead you now hither, now thither, in random
directions
Chaste be your mind and body, completely subjected,
In obedience seeking the aim that is set before them;
None learns the mystery of freedom with discipline lost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in prison 1944.

Discussion Starter

Discipline? Never Did Me Any Harm!

What pictures or experiences come to mind when you hear the word *'discipline'*? Memories of home? School? Serving in the armed forces? Working on a hospital ward? Singing in a choir? Or what? Pleasant or unpleasant?

"I have open in front of me a book of essays lamenting Britain's poor industrial performance relative to other countries, the laziness of British workpeople, the apathy of our young people... – a pleasure-seeking, frivolous society neglecting God and duty. The most interesting thing about this book [Essays on Duty and Discipline] is that it appeared in 1913."²

Have things really changed for the worse, or is this just a debate that is repeated in every generation? How far does effectiveness of discipline depend on the people who are being disciplined understanding what the goal is and agreeing on its value? Is there any point in 'disciplining' people who can see no aim or goal, nor ever have had the opportunity to see one? You might ask a schoolteacher, youth worker or probation officer for insight here.

But while we can for ever discuss how much discipline should be imposed by law, or by school rules or by parents at home, notice that Bonhoeffer's poem is speaking about a different kind of discipline: self-discipline.

This is not so much a matter of conforming to rules set by others or by society or the state, or being controlled or driven by outside forces, but of making spirit and body *'subject to yourself completely'*. It is already a kind of freedom, because it means not being pulled this way or that by the whim or impulse of the moment, but always aiming for 'the goal that is set for your spirit'. To have a clear and right goal in view is to be free. So, far from being contradictory, *'discipline'* and *'freedom'* belong together.

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Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

Discipline and Freedom: A Fact of Life

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We often admire and wonder at the 'grace' and 'freedom' which gifted people display whether in the visual arts, drama, music or sport. Yet we know that the apparently effortless tennis shot down the line, or the breathtaking poise and flight of the dancer, or the heart-stopping turn of phrase of the poet, come not just from genius but also from the hard graft of long, dedicated practice. From discipline comes the freedom of inspired performance and creativity.

You might read up on one or two lives of famous stars of stage, screen or sport to illustrate this in more detail. What really kept such people going? What goal did they have and how did the discipline set them free to achieve it?

Or try and find out what it means in personal terms for an athlete to prepare for the coming Olympics.

Or can you find someone actually in your church and neighbourhood in any of the categories we have mentioned who would come and talk or be interviewed about 'discipline as a way to freedom'?

And if you think this is all too 'secular', take a look at I Corinthians 9: 24-27!

Bible Input

Matthew 4: 1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' '

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' '
⁷Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' '

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' '
¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Another
text for pondering:
Hebrews 12:1-11...

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Bible Input

(Continued)

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

The story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness has long been a central theme for meditation in Lent. Jesus is here seen by Christians as a role-model for resisting the allurements of 'the world, the flesh and the devil'. Jesus refuses to satisfy his hunger by privileged use of supernatural power. He refuses to give visible proof, to himself and to the public, of his status as Son of God by putting on a demonstration of magical preservation from danger. He refuses to be handed immediate control of all the world at the price of his loyalty to the One who alone is to be worshipped and served. But the full impact of the story is missed if we read it as one of Jesus being tempted by what we usually think of as 'sinful desires' relating to material greed, sexual appetite, lust for power, cruelty and violence. These temptations of Jesus are above all subtle, because they are not evidently wicked. There is much to be said for them! At least, what would be wrong in Jesus easing his own hunger by turning stones into bread? Or creating public interest in his ministry by some wonder-working (and after all, the devil in verse 6 is actually quoting the Bible at him!)? Or getting into a position of power over the world where he might have a lot of influence and even keep the devil in the background?

We can read the Matthew passage with some fresh perspective by seeing it as a contest about freedom. With each of the three temptations (verses 3, 5-6, 9) in turn, let someone in the group (preferably different in each case), act the role of the devil and spice up the

So what kind of self-discipline does Jesus exercise? And what kind of freedom does he live by?

temptation by highlighting the freedom Jesus will have as a result of going this way: 'You'll be free from . . . You'll be free to . . .'. Let the rest of the group ponder and suggest what Jesus' response might be in such terms as 'If it's

Can you think of other instances in the Gospel stories where Jesus both accepts discipline and shows freedom?

freedom you're talking about, then ...'

Discipline and Freedom: The Religious Life

From the early centuries of Christianity there have been those who have felt called to live a life of special devotion to God, which requires them to give up attachments to this world and the benefits and comforts of normal everyday life, including marriage and family. The monastic tradition has been of immense importance in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and has influenced the whole of Christianity. Indeed, other traditions - such as the Anglican since the 19th century - have also formed religious communities on similar patterns, and there are ecumenical communities too, perhaps the most famous being that of Taizé in France. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, too, believed that in the Third Reich there was need for a 'new monasticism' to counteract the easy compromise that so many Protestants had made with the ethos of Nazism. The illegal theological seminary he set up and led in 1935-37 introduced the ordinands to an unusually close-knit communal life hitherto almost unknown in German Lutheranism, with its own discipline of prayer, meditation, confession, mutual regard and support as well as academic study. Part of his inspiration for this came from visiting theological colleges and religious houses in England, most notably the Anglican Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield.

How does following a 'rule' square with Christian freedom?

To be a monk or nun means following a 'rule', often summarised as the threefold vow of poverty, chastity obedience, but in fact covering every area of life in the community of one's 'Order'. The most influential teacher of the monastic life was St Benedict (480- 503) whose 'Rule' became widely followed in the Western Church and is still the basis of so much monastic life today.

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A Suggestion

What is it actually like to live according to a 'spiritual discipline'?

To find out, why not have your group enquire if they could visit a religious community in your area and learn more at first hand? Or, invite a member of such a community to meet with you. How do members of such a community find the relationship between discipline and freedom? Alternatively, here is testimony by Father Daniel, Abbot of the Cistercian Community on the Welsh island of Caldey, off the coast of Pembrokeshire. The Cistercian Order was founded in the 11th century in France, by those who wished for a more rigorous following of the Benedictine Rule:

Father Daniel: 'What it means for me to be a Cistercian today'

"[St Benedict] speaks about the blessings of living within a community, but also about its trials. Community life is a school that helps me to grow in authenticity. It helps me to get in touch with myself, the strong and the weak aspects of my personality. This road I do not travel on my own, but together with brothers. This journey of self-discovery has to be nourished with a frequency of prayer, reading (Scripture, Church Fathers, Monastic writings, but also perhaps psychology and good novels can be a great help), celebrating the Eucharist, and the work within and around the monastery.

Because it happens that being in touch with oneself and with these different occupations throughout the day, I discover a link, a bond that tells me

that I belong to that greater family. St Paul calls this 'the Body of Christ', St Benedict calls it 'The Household of God'. This discovery breaks through eventually, through periods of pain and disillusion.

Community life can be quite difficult

at times, because you meet

yourself and the brothers

not always in an ideal

picture!

Personally I am

very much convinced that

this 'dark' experience opens the

door to meet 'the Crucified Christ'

whose presence inevitably brings me in touch

with the promise of 'new life', with the unshakeable

hope in something as 'future', a foretaste of a life that has

no end. Again the words of St Paul: 'God's strength manifests itself

when I am weak', is the common experience that runs through the

Cistercian life of the past and today. To be a Cistercian for me is to open

myself for God, which has to be in truth, in my truth, in the reality of today. For

me God is the utmost REALITY, the utmost PRESENCE. This presence is where I feel

drawn to. His presence is not something spectacular, not something extraordinary, not something like having phenomenal visions. No, it is the day-to-day experience of life. Getting up at 3h00 am, praying Vigils at 3h30, breakfast at 5h00, Eucharist and Lauds at 6h30, working in the Bakery till 11h30, then prayer, Dinner, a short siesta, working in my office where I do my correspondence, receive and send e-mails and listen to the brothers who want to see me about business or more personal matters.

Vespers (prayer) at 17h30, Supper, silent prayer, Compline at 19h35, and then to bed, because the day starts early. To be a Cistercian is just to get on with life as it presents itself from

moment to moment, to try to be 'here'. That can be quite a job. So often I think about

yesterday and plan for tomorrow. In fact, what it comes to is the 'here and now', to be

receptive and available. That is for me to open my heart for the presence of life,

to the brother, to my own self, to be open for the presence of God, whose presence

is active in ALL situations. All the practices of the day help me to open the

door of my heart.

Jesus is the heart

of the Cistercian life

of all ages. Christ means to

live your life in the ultimate truth,

which means to respond fully and freely

to my TRUE self: being an image of God."

Prayer, silence, reading, studying, etc are not ends in themselves, they are 'tools' that provide me

to become attuned with 'the real life',

that means for the Cistercian:

Jesus Christ.

Used with acknowledgments. For more from Fr Benedict and on Caldey Abbey, visit <http://www.caldey-island.co.uk>

What can be learnt from 'the religious life' as practised by, monks and nuns, which can be important and helpful for other Christians?

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Discipline and Freedom: Recipe for Survival

An obvious application of self-discipline today lies in the need for restraint in our consumption and the adoption of a simpler lifestyle. It is more and more widely accepted that we need to reduce carbon emissions, find and use renewable sources of energy and generally *'live more simply that all may simply live'*. If we are all to be free to live on this planet, we all must exercise more self-discipline.

How far has this been reflected in our preaching, praying, Christian ethical teaching and the actual practice of our churches?

Chastity is usually thought of as the restraint of sexual desire and its confinement to the marriage bond. But it can also be a metaphor for a much wider discipline of *'restraint'*. Notice that Bonhoeffer's verse does not imply that all desires are 'bad' or 'harmful'. It is simply that, good or bad, there can be so many of them leading us 'now hither, now yon', that we lose all sense of direction and purpose because they are *'no longer subject to yourself completely'*. Bonhoeffer himself was a very gifted person – intellectually, artistically (a very accomplished pianist), athletically even. *'As we often remarked later – Bonhoeffer was capable of anything'* said one of his parishioners in London.³

The American Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-92) wrote a much-loved hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'. one verse of which runs:

*Drop thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease.
Take from our lives the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.*

He knew the dangers of dissipating his energies precisely because there was so much that he could do. Is there not a danger, therefore, of an 'unchaste religion' too?

We might well ponder that phrase, 'ordered lives'. Whittier was in fact warning against a kind of over-emotional, self-indulgent kind of religiosity which he likened to drug-induced ecstasy.

A church member writes:

"With each year I'm coming to dread Christmas more and more. It's not so much the frantic 'commercialism' that we hear so much about from the pulpit, and not the hassle that's involved in providing 'festive fun' for all the family. Nor is it the need to 'put the Christ back into Christmas' – that dreadful threadbare cliché! Quite the opposite. In fact as a church member I find there's just too much religion at Christmas – in my church at any rate. I look back almost affectionately to the time when there was a just a carol service the Sunday before Christmas, then Christmas morning service and perhaps a children's party later. But over the years our church's Christmas calendar has become progressively overloaded. Gift service, Christingle service, nativity play, midnight communion, parties for each and every age group in the church... and so on all now join the treadmill. I end up with religious exhaustion with hardly time to think what it all means. I don't object to any of these things in themselves, but do we have to have ALL of them EVERY year?"

Does this apply only to Christmas?

Would a more 'ordered life' be desirable for your church, or churches together group? What would it look like? What new freedoms might it bring?

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Using Science and Technology: A Free-For-All or Discipline?

The notion of self-discipline, of choosing what is the best course in face of all kinds of good possibilities, presents a huge challenge to us today with science and technology having made such dramatic advances not least in the field of medicine. There is so much that might be done through organ replacements, development of new drugs, stem cell development, embryo research, genetic modification, the use of artificial enhancement of the body. . . . and much else. Some people fear that biological and medical advance is leading us to 'play God'. Others believe that such knowledge and expertise is not godless, but God-given, that God wants us to be grown up and mature enough to use our best abilities to promote human well-being. Bonhoeffer himself in his prison writings spoke of humankind's 'coming of age' as something to be welcomed by faith. But a mark of real maturity is self-discipline, being able to choose what has to be done out of all the possible things we could do. On the public stage, this is a huge issue in the application of science and technology to health needs today. How should we focus and concentrate our limited resources? And does faith in God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier give any guidance here?

Scottish scientist and theologian Donald Bruce, Director of the consultancy Edinethics (Ethics in Science and technology), writes:

What do we do with our technological potential to change everything around us, and even ourselves? What discipline is needed to channel it rightly, motivated not only by the excitement of new possibilities, but also in the light of the panoply of human need, sufferings, injustices, and damage to the environment on which all lives depend. For those seeking to bring about God's kingdom in and with their lives, how do we choose to use the potential of technology, to help bring about God's kingdom, not hinder it? One response is personal discipline in my choices. Do I need or merely want the latest gadget advertised on TV? Can't I walk or cycle...rather than drive? How do I use the limitless information available on the Internet in my vocation before God? Can my choices with technologies bring about redemption, relationship, justice or healing, in a wonderful, but spoilt and fragmented world?

Another response is at the societal level. The same challenge, put prophetically to the churches by industrialist Willie Robertson in 1968, led to setting up the Church of Scotland's Society, Religion and Technology Project (SRT). Over issues like energy and climate change, genetic modification, cloning and stem cells, SRT's unusual model of well-informed direct engagement with leading scientists and policy makers has repeatedly provided a much respected Christian voice at policy tables and in the public square.

A biblical model of creative, relational human beings, responsible to God and each other, and for God's creation, both encourages technologies but sets limits and priorities. For example, rather than trying to enhance rich and well-fed humans, can our skills in energy, computing, food, genetics, nanotechnology or neural sciences be focused more on healing our planet?

Do you expect the Churches to be able to give guidance on these issues in the next few years?



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Special Issues

The Bioethics Working Group of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches is also making a special study of these issues this year. Here is an extract from the summary of its discussion document:

A small but vociferous movement, known as transhumanism, promotes human enhancement in the belief that humans must take our evolution into our own hands to go far beyond our current biological limitations. This technological transformation of humanity has a quasi-religious character, and as such we regard it as erroneous and misleading. The expression 'playing God', perhaps has a real meaning here. We agree with a human aspiration to better ourselves, but technology cannot provide salvation from the deeper moral, spiritual and social problems of human nature. Moreover enhancement is not an inevitable course that humanity is embarked on, like an unstoppable juggernaut. Faced with the technical possibilities, the question facing us is to decide what course to take, what to explore and what not to pursue.

But if we had humbler aspirations than making superhumans, what might God expect humans to do with God-given creativity and inventiveness? Should we leave well alone, or are all things permissible?

?

In Conclusion

The Big Fight

The Combatants:

In this corner of the ring,
sitting waiting, ready and still,
Discipline; lean and tough,
stripped to the bare essentials,
plain and unappealing;
of mature years, though some
would claim long past it,
few fans, little publicity;
an unknown entity.

The time: today tomorrow, always
The referee: the arbiters of today's values,
whenever it is today
The trophy: freedom
The venue: the world out there and the world within
The duration of the fight: till death – yours and mine
The Winner: all those acting, suffering, disciplined and dying, for Jesus Christ's sake.

*Isobel de Gruchy*⁴

And in this corner of the ring, focus of all eyes,
Indulgence, prancing dancing, posing
to show to maximum effect,
amid the cameras' flashing lights,
stunning looks, copious gold chains,
flamboyant robe: young and self-confident,
the idol of many.

Further Resources

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline. The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Hodder & Stoughton 1980).

To Do

In what ONE way do you think you could make your life more 'ordered'? Choose a simple goal to aim at in your life for the rest of this Lent. At the end of Lent – say on Easter morning – reflect on what this has taught you, and whether and in what way it has brought you 'freedom'.

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References

¹ 1st verse, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom'. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 8 (Fortress Press 2009), p512.

² K. Clements, A Patriotism for Today (Collins 1986), p9.

³ Laurence B. Whitburn, in Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (eds), I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Collins 1973), p79.

⁴ Isobel de Gruchy, In Well and in Woe. Poems. Published privately, Volmoed, Hermanus, South Africa 2010.

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