

The Way to Freedom Week 3: Action

Summary

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

- + Reflect on how easily we are seduced into a kind of *'freedom'* which cocoons us from the world around us.
- + Look at an example of an 88-year old who is ever ready to act and get others acting to meet human need.
- + Look at *'civil courage'* as highlighted by Bonhoeffer and at some examples of courageous action by people in the Gospels.
- + Reflect on an account of the riots in English cities in August 2011 and the controversies they provoked about responsibility in society.
- + Note examples of where churches are fully involved in the society around them.



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Action

*Daring to do what is right, not what fancy
may tell you,
Seizing reality boldly, not weighing up chances,
Freedom's in action alone, not in wavering thought.
Leave aside anxious delay and go into the storm of our history,
Borne along solely by faith and God's will and commandment;
Freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy.¹*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in prison 1944

Discussion Starter: *What Ought I - What Can I - Do?*

Not many of us, one trusts, will ever find ourselves in quite such a dire situation as the context out of which Bonhoeffer was writing!

Faced with evil on such a colossal scale as was found in Nazi Germany, especially as the war progressed and the 'Final Solution' of the Jews was being implemented, the question *'What ought I, or we, do?'* became fearful and inescapable.

Yet many people could not find an answer to it. As often as not, it was not that they themselves were 'evil' or personally supported the Nazi policies. Rather, they found themselves paralysed by other questions like: 'The state may be acting wrongly, but don't I have a duty to obey the state especially when the country is at war and in peril? If I act in opposition and am caught, what will happen to me and my family? Do I really know enough about the situation to act responsibly? Can I be sure that taking a stand will not lead to unforeseen consequences and make matters even worse? Or at any rate, what actual difference will my own action make given that the scale of the wrongs is so huge?'

Bonhoeffer knew from his own experience that such questions were very real and not to be dismissed lightly. Looking back on his own life and his decision not just to oppose Hitler but to enter the conspiracy to overthrow him, he knew very well the temptation (especially as an 'intellectual' person!) of 'escaping to thought', and of being stuck in 'anxious faltering'. But this for him was a kind of enslavement. Liberation had come through daring to

'enter the storm of events' sustained only by his faith in God and acting in line with what he knew of God's will. Freedom both prompts and grows through action, in face of

everything that says
'Stay put, stay safe.'

*Ponder
for a minute or
two this verse in the
light of some of your own
experience of 'making up your
mind' to do, or not do, something. Are there
words or phrases in the first four lines which you
feel are rather uncannily aimed at you?
If so, which and why?*

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The Way to Freedom

Week 3: Action

Free From...

Deep within each of us, perhaps, lies the wish to live in a cocoon insulating us from the noisy and sometimes dangerous world outside. That would be the ultimate 'freedom': freedom from the world of cares, work, responsibilities, pain – and often just other people! Maybe we never entirely lose the comforting memory of the womb and hope, however wishfully, to be there again. We would at least be 'free from' so much that troubles and worries us, and not least the problems of society. In fact, that safe 'cocoon' might equally well be a prison preventing our growing into the people we can and are meant to be.

Take a look at how much of our advertising plays on our deep-seated wish to be 'free' in this sense. Record and play back some TV adverts, or look at the adverts in glossy magazines especially for travel, holidays, homes, cars and 'creature comforts' and reflect on them for the promise of 'freedom' that they imply.

There's nothing new about this of course, and there are religious versions of this longing to escape, too. Have someone in the group read aloud Psalm 55:1-11!

"But what if . . . the point of living isn't to be placid and happy and untouched by the world, but to be deeply, painfully sensitive to it, to see its cruelty and savagery for what they are, and accept all this as readily as we accept its beauty? To be touched by it, moved by it, hurt by it even, but not be indifferent to it?"

John Simpson, BBC News World Affairs Editor,
Not Quite World's End. Travellers Tales
(Macmillan 2007 p440f).

Don't Just Sit There...

Some people just seem to be natural 'doers'. Betty is 88 years old . . .

She leads a remarkably active life. Her husband, who died in 1985 and had been a registrar of births, marriages and deaths, had been committed to the Samaritans and she shared in that work too, being Chair of the Friends of the Samaritans in her town since 1976. She also had an association with the work of National Children's Homes. Bringing together a group of ever-willing friends she is always ready to set in motion the next fundraising morning which is held at the Methodist Church. The hall is always packed with books and bric-a-brac, a cake stall, teas and coffees, and so much besides. Following a recent tsunami her 'morning' raised some £8,000- 'but,' she adds, 'that did include a £2,000 donation!' The proceeds generally go to the Methodist Relief and Development fund and/or to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeals. Such efforts have gone on for many years and it is she who is still the Queen Bee at 88! If Betty calls you respond! And after the event she phones everyone who helped to say 'thank you!' and declare the sum raised.

The local Rotary sponsored an award to the 'Citizen of the Year' which in 2003 was awarded to Betty. Further to this, her work was recognised through an invitation to Buckingham Palace where she met the Queen.

Turn over
for an interview
with Betty...

The Way to Freedom

Week 3: Action

An Interview with Betty

A friend recently interviewed Betty to find what makes her 'tick':

Q. What inspired you to raise funds every time there has been an emergency requiring aid in any part of the world?

A. I was brought up in a loving Christian family in a Baptist church in Wantage. My father, who had a flour mill, was always very responsive to the needs of the sick or hungry or lonely and to those who suffered on account of natural disasters. I learned compassion from him. I and my husband joined the Samaritans and when I moved here I drew in many friends from the church and the Samaritans organisation to raise disaster relief funds. This has perhaps been going on for some thirty years!

Q. Who were your most important role-models?

A. My father, about whom I have already briefly spoken above, and Mother Theresa whose care of the destitute I always found to be very moving and very challenging.

Q. What do you say to those who say, 'Why bother? The problems are so great you won't make any difference.'

A. I say that the very least we can do in the face of a disaster or a crisis is to try our best to send help, and as much of it as we can. I do not believe such efforts are without effect and anyway I feel compelled to respond in a positive way to the tragic circumstances about which we too often hear.

Q. How do you go about motivating others to join in?

A. I get on the phone to some 30 or 35 friends and say, 'Come on- you have got to help me!' and they do! These friends come largely from the Methodist church and the Samaritans organisation. We are always ready with a garage or two full of saleable goods. As soon as a disaster occurs we get into action and announce that we shall be holding a coffee morning and sale in aid of such and such. These events are always well supported. I always phone my helpers to tell them the total we have raised which encourages them.

Q. Do you ever get scared that your plan won't come off?

A. No! Not in any serious way though I sometimes ask myself if I have cash floats for the stalls and everything in place- minor things like that. We operate to a consistent plan so there are lots of experienced helpers on hand!

Q. Have people ever criticised you for what you are trying to do or the causes you support?

A. I am aware that some people appear not to feel any particular sympathy or responsibility for third world countries or victims of natural disasters but I have never had criticism directed at me for trying to help.

Q. What has given you the greatest satisfaction of all the 'good things' you have done?

A. The effort to help after those dreadful tsunamis struck and we saw dreadful pictures of so many people being swept away. On one such occasion we raised over £8,000 in one day and that was certainly exciting and very satisfying even if the sum helped only a few.

Q. What part do faith and prayer and being part of the church play in your very active life?

Q. Do you ever take 'time off'?!

A. I relax these days by knitting, reading, watching TV and doing jig-saws. I am fortunate enough also always to get a good night's sleep!

A. They all play an important part. I have been a regular church-goer all my life and prayer on a daily basis is also important to me. In the context of the fund-raising ventures I am also always moved to pray for God's blessing on what we are offering.

What makes some people 'doers' more than others? Is there a difference between 'do-gooding' and 'good doing' and if so, what?

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The Way to Freedom

Week 3: Action

Civil Courage

There are many forms of 'doing'. Not all of them are necessarily always admired from the start. Sometimes they involve someone standing up to do or say things publicly which others are unwilling or afraid to do.

Writing shortly before his arrest in 1943, Bonhoeffer wrote about the lack of 'civil courage', that is, the willingness of people as citizens to act responsibly for justice and truth in society, without either being told what to do from on high, or leaving it to others to do, or blaming others for the situation, or waiting until everything was absolutely clear and certain as to what should be done.² Many people in Germany, he wrote, traditionally saw their 'duty' as primarily that of following orders 'from above' – which was not such a bad thing if those giving the orders were themselves acting for justice and human dignity, but quite a different matter if those in power were themselves essentially criminal as was now the case. On the other hand, those who now saw the state as discredited felt lacking in any kind of 'moral compass' (to use our contemporary language). People were either lacking in any kind of moral scruples, or trapped in 'self-tormenting scruples that never led to action', whereas 'civil courage can grow only from the free responsibility of the free person'.

To show 'civil courage' means breaking out of fears and self-concern into responsible action for others in society and so showing real freedom: the freedom to act instead of forever thinking what might or should be done; the freedom to engage with the world instead of always keeping it at arm's length for safety's sake.

Bible Input

The Gospels: People who dare to take action.

It has been well said that in the Gospel stories Jesus admires people for their cheek at least as much as for their piety. Here is one such story:

Mark 2:1-11: Jesus Heals a Paralytic

*1*When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. *2*So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. *3*Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. *4*And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. *5*When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' *6*Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, *7*'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' *8*At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? *9*Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? *10*But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.'

One of you imagine yourself to be a 'fifth man' accompanying the four who are carrying the paralyzed man, and you are somewhat fearful about whether what they are doing is either right or wise.

What do you say to the four others, at each stage in the story as told in verses 1-4, to try and dissuade them from what they are doing?

The rest of you in the group – how do you reply?

What is the real difference between this 'fifth man' and the others?



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The Way to Freedom Week 3: Action

Interpretation

If these four men do not behave in a conventional way, then neither does Jesus in declaring the paralyzed man's sins to be forgiven, there and then. Usually when reading this story we concentrate on the controversy generated between Jesus and the scribes – the 'doctors of the law' – over his authority to forgive sins. That remains the climax to the story – together of course with the drama of the paralyzed man actually being healed in confirmation of Jesus having that authority. But let us not pass over too quickly how the four friends and the paralyzed man himself may have viewed what happens once his pallet touches the ground in front of Jesus. When Jesus addresses the paralyzed man both what he says and the way he says it are surprising. In the first place, we should note that in verse 5 the word translated in most of our English versions as 'son' is literally 'child' – Jesus is effectively welcoming the man and saying that they belong together as parent and child.

Jesus, equally, welcomes and rejoices in the bold, free actions of the men, but does not simply do what they hope for - not at first anyway. He first pronounces the forgiveness of the sins (whatever they may be) of his 'child', and only when his right to do so is challenged by the scribes does he declare the man's healing. Jesus thus fulfils the hopes for healing - but also goes beyond them in unforeseen ways. So bold, free action results in what was hoped for but much else too: realisation that not just another healing prophet is here, but God's kingdom bringing a totally new beginning and wholeness of life; and also, new and perhaps less welcome, the stirrings of controversy and opposition to Jesus. Did they dream that it would 'end' this way?

Other stories that can be looked at as examples of people breaking rules, conventions, etiquette or religious codes:

- Mark 2:23-28
- Mark 7:24-30
- Mark 10: 46-52



Photo: Suzanne Tucker/Shutterstock.com

Civil Courage Today?

What does 'civil courage' look like in our society today? And where are Christians and churches showing it, becoming free by acting for justice in the community without regard for their comfort, safety or reputation?

The riots in several English cities in August 2011, as well as generating violence and widespread damage to property and livelihoods, prompted an avalanche of comment and diagnosis of 'the ills of society'. Blame was poured by turns upon poor parenting, lack of discipline in schools, gang culture, inadequate policing, a consumerist culture from which many young people feel excluded by unemployment or other forms of social deprivation . . . and so on.

Some pointed the finger at the churches, asking 'Where is the voice of the churches?

Have you nothing to say?' Christians might well have felt caught between a rock and a hard place on this one. On the one hand it was tempting to say, 'The riots

show what happens when a society departs from God and Christian values

– don't blame us!' On the other hand this could be tantamount to admission of failure by the churches: if they had done their

job properly (or 'fulfilled their mission' to use the

more religiously correct language) would

there be so many people,

younger ones especially,

feeling rootless?

The trouble is that so much comment about the riots – and from all points of view – came from a safe distance from the streets where it was all happening: the destructiveness, the violence, the rage, the fear, and the heartbreak of those who suffered.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

The Way to Freedom

Week 3: Action

Revd Hayley's Story

One such person was Revd Hayley Matthews, Anglican priest and chaplain to 'Media City' at Salford Quays, Greater Manchester. She recorded graphically her experience:

"There had been several rumours of riots when I drove home on Tuesday night, but I knew that many of them were false alarms. When I pulled up my car, I saw lots of riot police, lots of vans, thousands of spectators, and a handful of teenage hoodies with bricks and stones, more mouth than action. The police did a really good job of dispersing them over an hour and a half and it seemed that all was quiet.

But then a couple of lads and one drunk elderly man began pulling at Bargain Booze's shutters, as other kicked cracks into the bank's door. He was drunk and angry and clearly hated the police, and judging by their first-name terms he was no stranger to them either.

Some of us ended up "kettled" while the police at either end of the precincts kept control of the lads with the stones. I was wearing my dog collar, which made this experience all the more surreal. Then some of the youths set fire to Salix: a place that enables people to find somewhere to live.

People began to get really angry with the "bored young lads destroying our community" as one bloke put it.

I spoke with the reporter whose car was set on fire just moments before. He seemed very shaken and later some residents told me that the lads had set on him for filming and photographing them – after all, it would count as "evidence". And there I was with hundreds of others with my iPhone out seemingly completely immune.

Oddly, one man put down the golf club he was using to smash shop windows when he saw my collar. He went red and nodded at me. Others put down stolen goods, and still others walked up to proclaim their disgust at what was happening. But as the drinking ("free beer!") got underway, cars screeched into the area that clearly were the organized element of the criminal culture and I thought it wise to cover up.

As I watched through the thick, black smoke billowing from a burned-out car, talking to residents of the blocks of flats in direct line of the fire, I saw teenagers loot an electrical goods sole trader's shop. Don't get me wrong when I say this, but if they'd nicked the TVs and laptops I could almost understand it, but they simply brought them outside and smashed them to bits in the street.

Young girls drinking alcopops "dared" each other to go and nick something. Lads tried to break into Lidl and set fire to it, and mothers sent small children in to fill shopping bags with food and beer because they were too young to be arrested.

The Way to Freedom Week 3: Action

Want, Want, Want?

I wasn't the only one challenging some of this – other residents were trying to talk sense into those who had somehow lost all sense of their normal boundaries, but it seemed like one big joke to a mass of hysterical people laughing all the way to the bank. How could anyone put their children in such a dangerous position, never mind ask them to commit crimes?

Suddenly there was a mass exodus: the precinct had been compromised and there were shouts of “iPhones! Xboxes! Everything! You can get whatever you want!” Hoodies went up and scarfs went over faces, in they went and more “respectable” cars started arriving to collect the goods. Youths started arriving with hammers and the women and girls backed off. What appalled me most was the amount of families – with kids in the back seat – involved in all of this. Children hung out of car windows videoing it all on their mobiles.

I was able to leave once the police vans were smashed up and they retreated temporarily. Amazingly, just a few hundred yards away, all is peaceful and the riot is “on TV”. My clothes stank of smoke and I wanted to weep with rage at a society that has disenfranchised so many for so long while brain-washing several generations of children to want, want, want.

I also feel a kind of empty, shocked sorrow that I heard young children being taught to hate the police as they arrived, that parents would send them into dark, dangerous buildings to loot to feed their own greed, happy to teach them that stealing and looting and robbing and mindless waste and destruction are “funny”, because if I heard that once I heard it a thousand times tonight.

“I just think it's funny!” I saw the faces of police personnel, hardened with concentration for the task at hand, while people laughed at the potential damage they would inflict on somebody else's wife, son, daughter, mother.

The following morning many came out after breakfast and cleaned up the debris to ensure that it was ‘business as usual’ down at the local shopping centre, as glaziers and shutter specialists cracked on with replacing windows and doors. By 9.30am you'd have been hard-pressed to know that there was a riot, that the whole area had been grid-locked with cars picking up ‘free stuff’ and police riot vans the night before. It spoke volubly of some sort of silent civil courage that said, ‘this is our community, and we will not be defeated.’

You may be living in an area where riots did not take place, or are unlikely to. But what can you learn from those who acted responsibly and with ‘civil courage’?

What kinds of ‘civil courage’ are called for in your own community?

Is civil courage something that ‘just happens’ or can churches, for example, nurture people for it?



The Way to Freedom

Week 3: Action

Responsibility

It would perhaps surprise a lot of people to know that out on many of the streets affected were not only rioters, police and emergency services (and media crews) but ministers and clergy of many denominations with concerned 'ordinary' people of all kinds: watching, listening, talking, trying to persuade or warn, and helping endangered people as best they could; but above all, actually being there, to the point of danger. This was surely showing civil courage, a willingness to move beyond security and caution and blaming from a position of safety, to learn more at first-hand what was going on. This is the first stage of *responsibility*.

Good Practice: Learning From Examples

Churches all over Britain and Ireland are involved in all kinds of ways in social responsibility, and they offer valuable examples whereby they can learn from each other – especially where they are reaching out in less popular causes that often draw criticism such as helping asylum seekers. See for instance <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poJHnAC8SokP> . In some areas 'Churches Together' groups are producing an 'audit' of their social engagement, with quite striking results. For a good example see Churches Together in Sussex - <http://churchestogether.org/sussex/> .

One of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winners is Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian activist who helped bring her country out of a brutal civil war. With others, she organized a group of Christian and Muslim women to challenge Liberia's warlords, and was honoured for mobilizing women across ethnic and religious dividing lines to bring an end to the long war and to ensure women's participation in elections. She trained as a trauma counsellor during the war and worked with former child soldiers. The Liberian civil war ended in 2003.

She is a member of the Lutheran Church of Liberia and says "My faith has really helped me," She also says that the best way to achieve global peace is to start in local communities:

"It is time for us to do justice in our communities ...
one day the world's problems will meet you at your doorstep."³

References

¹ 2nd verse, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom'. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 8 (Fortress Press 2009), p513.

² 'Civil Courage' in essay 'After Ten Years', Letters and Papers (see note 1), p40f.

³ ENInews 10 October 2011.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison,
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