

Paul' Freedom in Jesus Christ

Ps 47 and Galatians 1:1-10 – Sermon Text =Gal 1:3-5
712, 331, 708, 722

***“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age,
according to the will of our God and Father,
to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.
(Gal 1:3-5)***

The Catholic cathedrals and churches that we saw over the past couple of weeks in
Europe

were ornate, opulent, and strangely offensive.

They were clearly designed to honour and glorify God.

They were built at great cost, over many decades, and with remarkable artistry.

They are filled with tourists rather than worshippers,
and many charge a steep fee to enter

as a way of paying for the maintenance of crumbling old relics.

A number of the churches were attached to monasteries
that once housed hundreds of monks.

Now there are 10, 20, maybe 30, most of them over 50 years of age.

I had this overwhelming sense that this was a branch and brand of Christianity
that was trapped in its past.

There seemed to be a desperate attempt to preserve a way of practicing the faith

that is enslaved to a way of seeing and acting in the world

that is no longer speaking of the way God wants to be in the world.

It is a way of being Christian that no longer reveals a God

who calls his people to do justice, love kindness,

and walk humbly with their God into a future

constructed according to the faith Jesus taught

when he came to the Jews of his day in Galilee.

They were fixated on preserving and enhancing the ornateness of opulence of the
Temple,

ruled by an elite of priests and educators

who preserved their power and wealth

by collaborating with the foreign ruling power of the day,

the Roman empire.

It was against this way of being faithful to the God of Israel,

Creator and Sustainer of the universe,

that Jesus protested during his earthly ministry.

It was in favour of a simpler piety,

less grand, less controlling, less tied to material excess,
that Jesus stood for in his mission and ministry.

Saul had been a zealous servant of the Temple powers
who had plotted with the Romans
to rid the world of this rural ranter from Nazareth and his followers.
He had learned the Law in great detail
and followed its restrictive way of life with great diligence.
He had been revered among the Jewish powers that were
as a great defender of the faith
against an upstart sect that followed a peasant prophet.

That was Saul's work and witness
until the risen Christ,
this resurrected Jesus in whom the Creator of the universe
chose to fulfil all his promises to humanity,
encountered Saul on the Damascus road
and transformed him into Paul, his apostle to the Gentiles.

In that encounter, Paul found a freedom
that he had not been able to imagine in his earlier was of seeing the world.
Faith, as he understood it prior to this encounter,
consisted of believing the 'right' doctrines
and doing the 'right' things
to maintain the power and privilege
of those who claimed to know what God wanted and how to offer it properly.

This is a unique freedom.
It is a gift from the most powerful energy in the universe.
It relies on no system of thought,
no structures of power,
no strong men in positions of authority,
for its authority.
It depends on God alone for its power to liberate us
to be the people God created us to be,
living in faith, hope, and love.
It is not so much a freedom from, as it is a freedom for
loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves.

There was a great debate in the early church
over how Jewish you needed to be in order to be a Christian –
obedient to the old ways of observing the Law,
to the old rituals like circumcision,
to the old models of authority.

There was comfort and security in that controlling clarity.

But the freedom that Jesus had practiced
and passed on to his faithful followers
was not to be found in that kind of religiosity,
in that pattern of spiritual practice.

Galatians is Paul's testimony to the freedom he found
in his relationship with the resurrected Jesus, with the risen Christ.
It is worthy of our memorizing and pondering over the next few weeks
as a way of reminding ourselves
of what Jesus and Paul thought were most important
in following the God who had saved the world in Jesus Christ.

It was not about right rituals in expensive buildings
or about rigid rules imposed by ruling elites.
It was about loving God, loving others, and loving yourself
in the freedom that God created us all to enjoy together.
That's what Paul is trying to point to in the words he penned
for the church in Galatia.

Here are some of the themes and opportunities that we will pick up on and explore
further in the weeks ahead.

The 'sins' of our 'evil age' are opulence and oppression.
They often go together – oppression imposed by those with wealth to protect.
We often try to personalize this dynamic.
It's Napoleon, or Hitler, or Stalin, or Putin.
Those are the names we heard most often from our guides this past couple of weeks.
But it's really the mindsets and social systems
that give rise to these leaders and support them in power.
What does Christian freedom mean in the face of this kind of power?

There are lots of models and ideals in our modern society
to which we are urged to conform.
Advertisers promise us power and popularity
if we use this product, copying that prominent personality,
avoid this problem, or pursue that possibility.
Human beings who set themselves up as experts and elites
want us to do things their way and, in the end, for their benefit.
What does Christian freedom mean in the face of this kind of pressure?

Europe is still a region divided by race and filled with racial tensions and stereotypes.
The guides talked a lot about who had done what to whom,
usually generations ago.
Memories of hurt and horrors last long and run deep.
Every region in the world has its own version of these tensions.
Here in Vancouver, it's current shape includes

truth and reconciliation with our First Nations,
immigration from the Asian continent,
and our woefully inadequate response to the world-wide refugee crisis.
What does Christian freedom mean in the face of this kind of racism?

There are lots of other themes in the Galatian correspondence.
We'll touch on some of them as we dig deeper into the three I've just mentioned.
Overall, Paul presents surprisingly contemporary reflections
on the freedom he gained through his encounter and ongoing relationship with Jesus
Christ.

In presenting those reflections,
he in encouraging us in our own time and place
to submit ourselves to the same power freedom,
to the same gifts of the Spirit,
to the same joy of being free at last.

I've asked Daniel to play Oscar Peterson's 'Hymn to Freedom'
as our music for reflection this morning.
We are grateful to Ray Levesque for singing it with Daniel this morning.
Harriette Hamilton wrote lyrics for the piece
and they capture some of what Pastor Paul wrote about all those years ago.
Hamilton herself wrote of her composition:

*"... all the lyrics had to do was express in very simple language
the hope for unity, peace and dignity for mankind.
It was easy to write."*

Here are those lyrics:

*When every heart joins every heart and together yearns for liberty,
That's when we'll be free.
When every hand joins every hand and together moulds our destiny,
That's when we'll be free.
Any hour any day, the time soon will come when men will live in dignity,
That's when we'll be free.
When every man joins in our song and together singing harmony,
That's when we'll be free.*

And here are Daniel and Ray to play it for you.

