

St Mary the Virgin, Nottingham

The High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire's Legal Service

Sunday 4th March 2018, 10.45am

Isaiah 58:6-12 and Luke 10:25-37

Soon after his release from prison Nelson Mandela said *“To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”*

This past Thursday our middle son turned 18 and in advance of the day he'd thoroughly researched the new freedoms he is now permitted to enjoy. I tried to explain that his freedom exists within boundaries intended to ensure the maximum benefit for the common good. I pointed him to Bonhoeffer who said, *“If you set out to seek freedom, then learn above all things to govern your soul and your senses...for only through discipline may a man truly learn to be free.”*

On his 18th birthday he would have been quite within his rights to have responded, ‘Yeah Dad, whatever’. But in fact we had a rather bonding father-son conversation over a beer, the first pint he'd ever been free to buy me – though I paid for it!

Jesus said, *‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’* The heart of the Christian gospel is a message of freedom from slavery to sin and its terrible consequences. But it is not just glorious freedom from something, it is freedom **for** something.

And that important ‘something’ is a transformed relationship – with God and with our neighbour.

What we celebrate here today is not merely the fine vestiges of the ceremonial heritage of our city and county, or even a fitting tribute to all those who work tirelessly in civic life, in justice, policing and prisons. We celebrate freedom itself. And we do so at a time when there is, what theologian Richard Baukham calls, ‘a crisis of freedom’ in our contemporary culture.

He writes

“I think it is plausible to claim that freedom is the primary value of post-modernity. Yet freedom does not always mean the same thing. Big words like that rarely do. Isaiah Berlin said that the meaning of freedom ‘is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist.’”

He goes on, *“For contemporary people it is such a complex and culturally variable notion. It is a word so suggestive of unlimited good, so hospitable to all sorts of aspirations, that it can easily conceal the disadvantages of those aspirations, and can easily camouflage evils.”*

In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus disturbs a lawyer who felt he had comfortably fulfilled all his duties towards the law of God. And he could have strolled off with a sense of freedom from any further obligations, had he not decided to ask Jesus a throw away question to enhance his reputation even further. He asks, ‘And who is my neighbour?’

We can be very grateful to him, for Jesus’ reply has disturbed comfortable law-abiding people ever since. The parable of the

Good Samaritan displays the essential elements of freedom under God, without which we live in a self-imposed bondage.

First, True Freedom pays attention to the ‘other’ and acts with boundary-breaking compassion and generosity

The Good Samaritan had more reason than the other two travellers to pass by the beaten-up man lying at the side of the road. Samaritans and Jews were sworn enemies and their religious codes forbid them to even talk or touch each other. But Jesus explains, *‘When the Samaritan saw him, he had compassion.’* His actions are not carried out holding his nose or with any conditions attached. He tells the innkeeper, *‘Take care of him and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’*

This is shocking boundary-breaking compassion and generosity. And Jesus is not supplying a Sunday school story about being nice to your neighbour. He is confronting the complacent injustice of the most law abiding and religious people of his day.

Bonhoeffer said, *"We are not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."* And that's what Jesus is doing here and it didn't add to his popularity or respectability amongst the elite.

For me, Nottingham's own William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army, stand tall among those who have followed the teaching of Christ. Catherine was once asked why she couldn't strike a more conciliatory note confronting the harsh inequalities in mid-Victorian cities. She responded, *‘If we are to better the future we must disturb the present.’*

Secondly, **True Freedom cannot survive without the courage to forgive.**

Jesus doesn't tell us if the Samaritan had first embraced forgiveness towards the Israelite who he was moved to help. But there is nothing begrudging or limited about the care he lavishes on his enemy. And notice that his actions are not the consequence of a lengthy process of mediation either.

Perhaps he is free to care deeply for his neighbour because he is free of resentment. Or maybe unlike the lawyer who quizzed Jesus, the Samaritan is not seeking to justify himself in the eyes of anyone. He is self-forgetful, not self-consumed. Something that's not easy to achieve in our hyper-individualistic culture today.

Having the courage to forgive is the ultimate expression of true freedom. In the days following the collapse of apartheid in South Africa there's a story that emerged from the Truth and Justice Commission. The scene is a courtroom trial. And a frail black woman rises slowly to her feet. She is something over 70 years of age.

Facing across the room are several white police officers, one of whom, Mr van der Broek, has just been tried and found implicated in the murders of both the woman's son and her husband some years before.

He had come to the woman's home, taken her son, shot him at point blank range and then set the young man's body on fire while he and his officers partied nearby.

Several years later, van der Broek and his cohort had returned to take away her husband as well. After many months she was told the same thing had happened to her husband.

Now the woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions offered by Mr van de Broek. A member of the South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?"

"I want three things," begins the old woman calmly, but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

She pauses, then continues "My husband and son were my only family, I want secondly, therefore, for Mr van der Broek to become my son. I would like him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining in me.

"And finally," she says, "I want a third thing. This is also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr van der Broek in my arms and embrace him and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

Jesus said, *'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'* Whether or not we believe our society is facing a crisis of freedom, we are here today because we are committed to ensuring that all who

live in our city and county may live with freedom under the law. Yet true freedom given by God, is experienced through boundary-breaking acts of compassion and courageous forgiveness. No laws however good can condition the soul or the senses to display this freedom, only the love of God that constrains us and compels us can do that.

Christians believe we have been forgiven more than we could ever repay through the cross of Christ. And so for 18 year olds and 88 year olds there can be freedom from past regrets and future fears and gnawing resentments and broken dreams. This is why I believe our vision for a caring society pre- and post-Brexit needs a renewal of faith in God, in whose service alone we may find perfect freedom and eternal peace.