

Colossians 2v8-19 Luke 12v13-21 St Mary's 3 August 2025

This morning, I am going to speak about two of the most meaningful and powerful words in the New Testament; possibly two of the most meaningful and powerful words in the English language.

Paul is confident that Freedom and Life can be the experience of all, because Jesus, a human being who was also fully God, died on the Cross to receive all the evils of this world, all our burdens and sorrows on to himself. The rulers and authorities of this world, the Roman Empire and religious leaders of Israel, thought they had disposed of Jesus, but Colossians 2 verse 15 makes clear that Jesus made a public example of them, triumphing over them in his death and then giving the possibility of hope and freedom and life to every human being in this world by rising from the dead 3 days later.

When Paul writes in Colossians 2 verse 12 that “you were buried with him in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God” this means that those who trust in Jesus for their lives, identify themselves in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In our baptism service we explicitly rejected evil and turned to Christ as our Saviour. Our baptism is a sign of cleansing, but it is also a sign of our dying to ourselves as we symbolically go down into the water and rising again as we come out of the water. Following Jesus means that we die to ourselves but rise again to a new life of freedom in the kingdom of God.

The eagle-eyed amongst you will have noticed that freedom is not actually mentioned in the passage that Milton read. However, it is implied, because in verse 8 Paul warns the Colossians not to be held captive by human traditions and in verses 16 and 18 not to be condemned by others in matters of food and drink, religious festivals and practices.

Paul warns that his readers will be distracted and diverted from the freedom we discover in staying close to God in Jesus Christ. Following Jesus means that we are in Christ – incidentally that's phrase that is repeated many times by Paul in his letters- we are in Christ and need not be bound or captive to things in this world. We are set free to live in relationship with God by the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me suggest some human activities that capture us so that we are in danger of losing our freedom in Christ and harming our relationship with God. In all these situations let us remember the freedom that we have in Christ but not use that as an excuse to ignore normal human obligations to our families, friends, work and church.

As a slight digression, I first want to comment briefly on the warning about philosophy in Colossians 2 verse 8. It might sound as if Paul is saying have nothing to do with the intellect. That's absolutely not the case. He was a highly educated person. He knew that it was important to respect contemporary thinking and engage with it. When he was preaching in Athens, he made a positive reference to the Greek philosopher who wrote, "In God we live and move and have our being." Augustine, who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries was one of the most influential Christian thinkers. Before he became a Christian he was opened to the possibility of a relationship with God by his reading of the Greek philosopher Plato. And so, we today must continue in the tradition of using our God given minds to think clearly and honestly about the big questions of this world and the universe. I believe the Holy Spirit of God renews the minds of those who follow Jesus. He helps us think more clearly, more honestly and more rationally. although it is always possible to retreat into stubborn and unthinking ways.

Family traditions threaten our freedom in Christ. Families are the bedrock of society. Mostly we find love and affirmation in our families, although there are clearly some tragic situations where that is not the case. However, even in the most loving and supportive of families there are ways of being and thinking, often they are unspoken, which can bind us. Jesus knew this. He grew up in a family with brothers and sisters. Perhaps that is why he made the apparently harsh statement that those who do the will of my Father are my brother and sister and mother, rather than his physical family. It can be challenging to go against our family's ways of thinking and behaving, especially if they are unspoken.

Greed in relation to bodily functions. Do we have a good relationship with what we eat and drink? Are we healthy in what we take into our bodies? Does our eating and drinking enhance social relationships? Can eating and drinking in any way cover up troubles inside us? I hesitate to say this, because I know that

drinking alcohol can be fun and brings people together, but I would ask if alcohol comprises our freedom in Christ, so that we behave and especially speak in ways that afterwards we are sorry about.

A naturally addictive personality can find expression in other ways. Drugs and even medical prescriptions can lead to broken lives. Pornography never satisfies and has an insidious way of yanking people back into its clutches. I was amazed this week on hearing of the huge number of people who have facially registered for pornographic websites because of the new requirement for age-appropriate registration. Gambling too captures minds and hearts and can destroy families and relationships. Being in Christ gives us freedom and enables us to be self-controlled in our bodies in the areas I mentioned. It still requires us to want to be free of these situations and to be determined to be free, but we also need to learn rely upon God's power to help us be free.

Some of us are troubled by a lack of confidence. Some of us suffer because of a lack of opportunities in life. I have met many especially elderly people during my time living in Islington who I know could have done many more things with their lives if only they had been given better educational opportunities and support. It is good that educational opportunities are better than they were 40 or 50 years ago. Nevertheless, some of us are prone to listening to that inner voice that whispers that we are no good at anything. It is not easy, but can we learn to trust that God is with us and will give us a sense of freedom and the strength so that we can achieve things?

Our gospel reading gives us a warning on another tack. "Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions", says Jesus. How many of us are gripped by a desire for more possessions, more money? Maybe that does not afflict many of us in church today, but surely it is a part of our society. Ambition can be a good thing, creating wealth and opportunities for many, but it also constricts, it captures, and it strangles. It can cause damage to the relationships with our nearest and dearest. How much time do we devote to our ambition? Do we retain the freedom just to be? The freedom to choose? These precious human gifts are sacrificed to the god of this world. How many people become the fool in Jesus' story? How much better to store up treasure in the freedom of our relationship with God.

It is clear from what I have been saying that Freedom is interwoven with Life. Because we have freedom in Christ, we have life in God. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2 verse 13, "God made you alive together with Christ, when he forgave us all our trespasses." We cannot get away from the fact that all of us at some time do things that are not pleasing to God. We recognise that in every service at St Mary's when we say together a public confession of our sins. The truly amazing thing is that God is always gracious and restores us to himself as we acknowledge things that we would rather not have done. It is truly life-giving to trust that the sins we have done have not only been forgiven by God, but they have also been totally forgotten. Sometimes we sing a song at St Mary's entitled, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate", which includes the line "As far as the East is from the West that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us." It is a quote from Psalm 103 verse 12. The freedom we experience in our Life with God, who Jesus taught us to call Father, is the greatest gift that we can enjoy here on Earth. It inspired St Paul which is why he travelled around the known world facing hardships of many kinds to bring the knowledge of the love of God. It inspired Martin Luther as his experience of God brought new life to the church of God in the 16th century. It inspired John Wesley who changed the nature of Britain by his preaching in the 18th century which reached the least privileged in society. It's what the late Pope Francis brought to the Roman Catholic Church and to the world by his simple lifestyle and openness of the Good News of Jesus to all.

Maybe there is a catch to all this lovely talk of freedom and life in God. There is a catch and it is this. When we follow Jesus, we follow somebody who although he was God, he became a human being taking the form of a servant. The Gospel of Mark tells us that the Son of Man, Jesus' favourite name for himself, came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many. Since the beginning of the Church of England its liturgy has always included the phrase, "Your service is perfect freedom." Is that an oxymoron? In other words, is that a phrase which is totally self-contradictory? The reality is something other. Serving God and others is one of the best ways to bring personal satisfaction, sheer enjoyment, a deeper understanding of humanity and growth to our lives. Yet how often do we reject the opportunities of service? We don't have the time. We don't have the skill to do what is required. We have better

things to do. The grace of God can free us from ourselves to serve him and others with joy.

There is so much that is paradoxical in Christianity. Service is freedom. Death brings Life. We learn more about the goodness and grace of God in times of hardship rather than happiness. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. God's grace is sufficient for us because God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Those who want to save their life lose it and those who lose their life for the sake of Jesus will find it. Let us learn to trust God and allow him to work in our lives, so that we live in freedom, not fear, and experience the abundant life that Jesus offers to all.