

**Silent Reflections**  
**Tuesday 31 August 2021**

**Freedom is an inside job**



*...if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed*

(John 8: 36)

## Introduction

This past 18 months, I have thought a lot about freedom and what it means for us in terms of our humanity and our faith. During lockdown, we had our personal freedoms curbed in ways that most of us have never experienced; even those who lived through the last war did not experience schools and churches being closed.

We have always had some freedoms curtailed by the law of the land. I am not free to take anything that belongs to another person without their permission. Taking their goods is called stealing, their good name, libel or slander, their money, fraud, their life, murder.

More recently the law has recognised coercive control as a criminal act, but other ethical matters are left to the individual conscience. For example, in this country, I can seduce someone's partner and not be criminally charged (that would not be so in all countries), but as a Christian, I also have Jesus' words to consider that everyone who looks at another with lust has already committed adultery in their heart (Matthew 5: 28), which presents a far more stringent code.

We have always prided ourselves on having freedom of speech, which includes freedom of the press in this country, but in recent times, it has been felt that those who use speech to incite others to acts of violence, so called hate crime, need to be restrained. So, our freedoms are curtailed for the protection of the vulnerable in our society. Freedom is distinct, as it always has been at heart, from license to do as we please, regardless of the hurt it may do to others. We *can* do anything, but we *may* not if it infringes the law of the land, or as people of faith, the law of God. In Galatians 5:13, we read: *do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another*, and in 1 Peter 2:16: *As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone.*

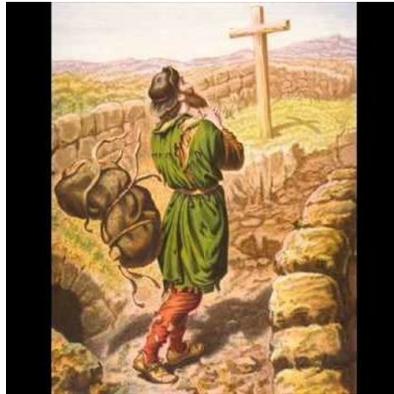
We often think of freedom in physical terms, and we lock people in cells as a punishment.



However, the Bible has a lot to say about what freedom truly is, and it is much more of an inside job. We are offered freedom from our compulsive and destructive bad habits, or fears, but only, strangely, by becoming slaves again. Only in surrendering to Christ can we experience true freedom and we are promised that *if the son makes you free, you will be free indeed*' (John 8:36).

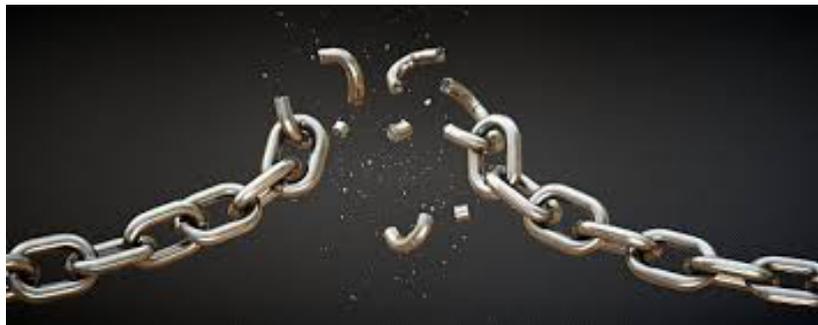
We can all look back on significant moments in our faith journey, times when our spiritual life deepened profoundly. For some of us faith has grown gradually from very early beginnings, but for others it came with a dramatic change of lifestyle. Yet, however it comes, that first moment of conscious surrender to Christ, is often regarded as a once in a lifetime event. A sense that, from now on, we are free of all that previously held us back.

In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, when 'Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble; and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more...Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden.



This has echoes in the hymn, *And can it be*:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray—  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*



**How is it then, that we so often find ourselves in the same position as the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, even after his dramatic conversion experience, saying:**

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

**Gerald May** has some comments, which may help us understand this. He writes in his book, *Addiction and Grace*:

*I am not being flippant when I say that all of us suffer from addiction. Nor am I reducing the meaning of addiction. I mean in all truth that the psychological, neurological, and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addictions are actually at work within every human being. The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies, and an endless variety of other things. We are all addicted in every sense of the word. Moreover, our addictions are our own worst enemies. They enslave us with chains that are of our own making and yet that, paradoxically, are virtually beyond our control. Addiction also makes idolators of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another. Addiction breeds wilfulness within us, yet, again paradoxically, it erodes our free will and eats at our dignity. Addiction, then, is at once an inherent part of our nature and an antagonist of our nature. It is the absolute enemy of human freedom, the antipathy of love. Yet, in still another paradox, our addiction can lead us to a deeper appreciation of grace...Grace is the most powerful force in the universe. It can transcend repression, addiction, and every other internal or external power that seeks to oppress the freedom of the human heart. Grace is where our hope lies.*

**Many others have written about inner freedom. As you read through these, stop where you find something that strikes you as helpful or challenging. There is a lot to digest here; take your time, perhaps beyond this hour, perhaps it will take a lifetime:**

**Benignus O'Rourke** *Finding Your Hidden Treasure*

*When we come home to ourselves, when we sink into our own delight, we also come home to God, who holds us fast yet leaves us free.*

**Ruth Burrows** (*Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*)

*I am running happily on the well-worn track, worn by thousands before me, good people serving God; I do not need to look further or even to question the direction of the path. We talk about freedom but we don't really want it... Freedom costs too much, it is frightening, it carries no guarantees; that freedom which makes me utterly and solely responsible to God for my decisions and choices; that freedom which sets me exposed, defenceless before the burning love of God.*

**Gerard Hughes:** *In Search of a Way* quoting St Ignatius:

*I began to see poverty (as in poverty of spirit) as a way to freedom, a letting go of all those securities which make me feel safe but which are, in fact, barriers to freedom. The greatest barrier is a conviction of our own rightness and righteousness. As the truth dawned on me, I became less afraid of questions and challenges, less anxious to 'help' people and more content to be with them. It was like learning to swim. I began to learn that I could float when out of my depth. I now thought of poverty as a kind of swimming exercise, a practice which enables us to let go of the rail of our own security and certainty so that we can learn to float in God.*

### **Christopher Chapman** (*Earthed in God*)

*The power of the desire to become is sown like a seed in each one of us. It may lie dormant, but it never stops working to set us free from what restricts us, and to draw us into abundant life...God knows what needs to be unravelled and released in us, and in what order, and how many times we might need to return to what seems the same place for freedom to move towards its proper depth...*

*The notion of 'resistance' conjures up pictures of desperate struggles against a powerful occupying enemy. But here the situation is more complex. The resistance movement is in the name of self-preservation against the perceived threat of an enemy who comes not by force, but by invitation, and not to oppress but to set free. Why, then, do we not cheer on the liberator? Because the movement of the Spirit works against well-formed habits of attitude, thought and behaviour. The pattern of life we have established might limit us, but at least it is familiar and therefore feels safe. Changing our ways will be difficult and may seem fraught with danger. Consciously or unconsciously, we find ways to resist.*

### **Henri Nouwen**

*When you are interiorly free you call others to freedom, whether you know it or not. Freedom attracts wherever it appears. A free man or a free woman creates a space where others feel safe and want to dwell. Our world is so full of conditions, demands, requirements, and obligations that we often wonder what is expected of us. But when we meet a truly free person, there are no expectations, only an invitation to reach into ourselves and discover our own freedom...*

*Where true inner freedom is, there is God. And where God is, there we want to be...When we are spiritually free, we do not have to worry about what to say or do in unexpected, difficult circumstances. When we are not concerned about what others think of us or what we will get for what we do, the right words and actions will emerge from the centre of our beings because the Spirit of God, who makes us children of God and sets us free, will speak and act through us.*

*You don't have to get caught in searches that lead nowhere. Neither do you have to become the victim of a manipulative world or get trapped in any kind of addiction. You can choose to reach out now for true inner freedom and find it ever more fully.*

We are only truly free then when we are indifferent, in the right sense. Not uncaring or insensitive in the face of the needs of those around us, but no longer allowing our behaviour to be governed by the opinions of other people, or by our own selfish desires, however they may be disguised. Jesus is the best example of someone who had complete inner freedom. Bishop John Spong wrote of him:

*Here was a whole human being: who lived fully, who loved wastefully, and who had the courage to be himself under every set of circumstances.*

## Points to ponder:

We know that only in asking for God's help can we truly be free of all our additions. We can begin by asking the Spirit to help us identify our areas of resistance. Ask yourself, of what do I say, "I can't resist..." We use this term all the time in trivial ways. I may say, "I can resist plain biscuits, but not any with chocolate on!" This is not a serious addiction, unless I take to eating packets of chocolate biscuits for weeks on end, and cannot stop myself. But excessive attachments to any manner of things can affect the actions we take and prevent us from being free. Sometimes we are not even aware of what our addictions are, or are afraid of what we might find, if we begin honestly to face ourselves. Bergan and Schwan cite a few possibilities to reflect on in their book *Freedom*, but each of us will probably have our own items to add to the list.

- Am I unduly attached to a particular house, church, location?
- Am I reluctant to sacrifice my own comfort; if so, to what degree?
- Is overconcern for success, achievement, prestige affecting my actions?
- How large a factor are excessive emotions in influencing a particular action, for example, fear, anger, enthusiasm?
- ...

None of this matters, of course, unless we are up for praying this prayer:

*Loving God, lead me into an increased awareness of anything that may be blocking my freedom. Make clear to me whatever attachments and dependencies possess and deflect me from my desire for you. Give me the strength to desire the desire to be guided by you in all the decisions I make, and actions I take.*

Fortunately for us, I believe that God loves us so much that he is prepared to take us by the hand and lead us gently along the path that leads us to greater freedom, step by step.

