

A new freedom to celebrate

Readings: Isaiah 29:13 – 16, Mark 7:24 - 30

Today we are celebrating. Owen Kimberley has a birthday today. At our 10:30 service this morning Jean McConachie's grandson Max will be baptised. Is anyone else celebrating today?

In New Zealand we can celebrate pretty much whenever and however we choose. We are free to celebrate Christian festivals as well as significant life events. This is a freedom we mustn't take for granted.

During the Christmas period of 2013 members of a church sang carols publicly, distributed Gospel leaflets and held a baptism service. On Christmas Eve the Christians gathered to sing carols outside a shopping centre. They handed out thousands of Gospel cards.

You might be thinking "Big deal, Christians do this all the time."

But these church members are from Beijing's Shouwang Church. Christianity is not allowed in China, apart from the watered down State sanctioned church. For 3 years now the Shouwang church has been banned from meeting together. The Chinese authorities' opposition continues to grow. As the Christians sang, the authorities forced them to move several times. Still they kept on singing and celebrating Jesus' birth; handing out tracts about Jesus.

Even as they suffer persecution the Chinese Christians celebrate. One Church member commented: "Surely one day, there will be no more tough persecution in Beijing. But, we are going to miss these days when our God does great miracles through us."

Our apparent freedom in the Western world could be dangerous. We could easily take for granted the miraculous nature of the true freedom that Jesus brings to anyone who will accept it.

Did you notice that I said “apparent freedom”? Many Christians are not free to worship or tell others about Jesus. Many of us are not free either, not really; perhaps because we are distracted by other things or perhaps because we are afraid of what others might think. Some of us are bound by fear.

But we can have true freedom. We can experience the full life that Jesus offers. And we can share that freedom with others. We can be set free from fear; from anything that holds us captive.

We read in the Prophet Isaiah part of a cheerful section of his writings containing several woes. These woes are addressed to the Jewish people who trust in the powerful nations rather than the God-appointed King. They were enticed by the temporary power of the kings around them, not realising they were becoming captive to that power. They forgot to be the people that God had called them to be; hence the woes.

Worse the prophets were pretending everything was fine. Their prophecies were not what God was saying.

We are not like the Jewish people though are we? We don't get enticed or corrupted by addictive or unhealthy things in our culture. We don't trust in our hard work or our financial security. We understand that those things can control our lives and rob us of our freedom don't we? Or do we?

Isaiah is not all doom and gloom. Interspersed with the woes are some wonderful promises:

- 28:5 and 6 ...the Lord Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people. He will be a spirit of justice
- 28:16 – 17 ...I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation, and the one who trusts will never be dismayed. I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the

plumb line. The sure foundation of Jesus Christ will bring freedom to many.

- 29:5 – 6 But your many enemies will become like fine dust ...the Lord Almighty will come ...
- 30:18 Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him.

Isaiah addresses himself to a people in disobedience and captivity. Yet the Lord longs to bring them into freedom. He longs for them and us to be a holy people. That holiness can come only through what Jesus Christ has done for us.

What is holiness? Biblical holiness is a way of treating the world and other people. Holiness is part of celebrating Christ's love in and through us. It is revealed as we live lives of justice and peace. Holiness enables us to be lamps through which the light of God's freedom can shine on all people; all people.

But is the passage from Mark's gospel saying that freedom is not available to all. What does Jesus mean by his response to the woman's request?

Let's put ourselves in the picture to see if we can understand what is happening.

Jesus has been so busy bringing freedom to the Jews, if they will have it! He tries to teach them that rules will not bring them freedom. You can't make rules against the evil that comes from within. Jesus tells the religious lot they should be seeking freedom from their internal struggles rather than fretting about food and stuff.

Up to now Jesus has been teaching and healing in Jewish provinces – huge crowds followed wherever he went. Jesus is exhausted. He desperately seeks peace and quiet by leaving Galilee and heading to the Greek region of Tyre

(Southern Lebanon today). The foreigners may not know of him. But even in a foreign land, the word is out. .

A very bold woman makes her approach. This woman was a Greek Syro-Phoenician. Even so she would have known Jewish custom. She knew full well that in Jewish eyes she was a pagan. Added to this, her gender and the fact that her daughter has an unclean spirit, make her a very undesirable Gentile indeed. She had no right to approach any Jew, let alone a famous and successful Jewish rabbi like Jesus.

Mark has shown us before though. There are ordinary people and then there are desperate people. This mother will risk anything for the sake of her daughter. Somehow she gains access to the house and falls down on her knees, beseeching Jesus to get rid of the demon afflicting her daughter.

Matthew's version of the story is that Jesus ignored her for a while. He couldn't keep ignoring her though – she was too persistent. She kept right on, begging Jesus to do something. Matthew also says that Jesus' followers urged him to send her away. "Sheesh this is getting embarrassing Jesus – let's get her out of here. She isn't one of us." Everyone wanted her out but she didn't care about that.

We've talked before about how Jesus knows what we really need and won't be hurried. Eventually Jesus responds. "The children must first be fed! It isn't right to take away their food and feed it to dogs." On the face of it that sounds very unkind; cruel even. But is it?

Actually Jesus is responding with a parable; a metaphor. He is treating her with great respect by explaining something to her. The word for 'dogs', is a very rare one; it actually means 'puppies' and carries no sense of denigration. Jesus reminds her of the common custom: in families the children eat at the table first

then the pets. It isn't right to violate that established order. Puppies don't get to eat before children.

Back to Matthew's version: Jesus explains that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. These are the children who need to eat first. Jesus wanted freedom for the Jews first. These children are Jesus' priority. Jesus went to them first so they could see he fulfilled God's promises recorded in the Bible. He would fulfil all the prophet's predictions, the God-initiated priesthood, the kingly line and the temple itself.

Jesus isn't being nasty – he just has clear priorities. But this woman is having none of that. It doesn't wash in her view. She is one gutsy and intelligent woman. She's not stropic; she knows her place in society yet is assertive and respectful. She doesn't get bad tempered with Jesus but responds calmly and clearly; "Lord, even puppies eat the crumbs that children drop from the table." She isn't buying into any notions of scarcity. She somehow understands that Jesus has enough for everyone.

Tim Keller puts it like this: She's not saying: "Lord, give me what I deserve on the basis of my goodness," she's saying "Give me what I don't deserve on the basis of your goodness – and I need it now."¹

Jesus is amazing. The disciples must have been getting sick of Jesus breaking all the conventions. Here he goes again. "Dear woman, you really do have a lot of faith. What an answer! You will be given what you want."

We know, from our reading of Scripture and with the benefit of history, that God never planned that his freedom would be only for the Jews. After Jesus' resurrection, he told the disciples to go to all nations.

The woman didn't know it at the time but immediately her daughter was healed. Imagine the celebration when she got home and found her daughter well and in

¹ King's Cross, Tim Keller, 88 - 89

her right mind. Imagine the hugging and kissing; the sheer joy! Imagine the family's delight in seeing the daughter set free to function as a normal girl again. There would have been a big party in Tyre that night as they celebrated the freedom that Jesus had brought to them.

Through Mark's Gospel, we've been following Jesus' from his home town towards Jerusalem where he will ultimately fulfil his sacrificial plan. That Master Plan designed to bring freedom to all. We've met various characters along the way – the religious lot we love to hate (cos they are a bit like us), feeble followers (also very similar to us), desperate Dads, all manner of people who all want something from Jesus. And now this foreigner whose faith enables her to see that Jesus came not just for his own people but to set everyone free.

From April 2011 Senior Pastor Jin Tianming, of Shouwang Church has been held under house-arrest. Jin founded the church in 1993 with 10 members. Now there are over 1000 believers. They have had to change church headquarters more than 20 times, and aren't allowed to buy or rent a church building.

In 2011 the government cracked down on dissidents. Several dozen church members were detained every week. They were only freed after signing a document denying any knowledge of their pastors. Six church leaders were illegally placed under house arrest.²

In early December 2013, Pastor Jin published his thoughts about what was happening. He concluded with this prayer:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a

² According to the German weekly Die Zeit, Beijing police use around 4,500 officers to provide surveillance of the local square and the homes of about 500 church members, to prevent the church from congregating.

knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.' 2 Timothy 2:1-6

Pastor Jin is under house arrest³, his movements and those of many church members are curtailed, and his freedom is apparently non-existent. Yet he possesses true freedom in Christ. Jin understands, like the Syro-Phoenician woman, that freedom comes through Jesus Christ. When we find ourselves in hard situations Jesus will sometimes change those circumstances; at other times he gives us the inner strength to persevere in the circumstances. He knows how to truly set us free.

What circumstances are you in right now? Good times or hard times? Whichever is true for you, Jesus wants to bring you true and everlasting freedom. And he wants to do it now, today. Will you accept the freedom that Jesus brings? The choice is yours.

If you want to be set free, then please come to the front of the church after the service. Someone will be available to talk with you and to pray with you. We would love to celebrate with you as you find freedom in Christ.

³ I haven't been able to get any more recent information than Christmas 2013.