

Being free people

Readings: Galatians 5:13-25 & Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Can anyone tell me the name of this boat? Sorry, not a boat, a ship.

Yes/No, it's called the RSS Sir David Attenborough

Does anyone know what it should have been called if they had followed the popular vote?

Yes, if the good people on the Internet had had their way then it would have been called...

Boaty McBoatface

The name was proposed in response to a fairly hollow PR exercise. They were hoping to engage the public by "getting them involved". There's lots of this sort of thing going on. Where we are given the opportunity to exercise our freedom in a series of increasingly irrelevant ways.

This sermon is about REAL freedom and it's another in our series inspired by chapters from the book "A culture of honour". I was looking at chapter 6, which is all about how to lead people. And the chapter starts with a quote, attributed to Thomas Jefferson:

"Free people are the most difficult to lead".

Because, free people might not want to pick up what you're putting down. You can nail your colours to the mast, but free people might insist on discussing your choice of mast instead. Free people are exactly the sort of people to come up with a name like Boaty McBoatface, and then insist you name your ship that.

Free people are the most difficult to lead. Gives us new respect for the job that Susan and Bishop Richard have on their hands eh? It's that old image trying to herd cats.

Well, today we're going to examine this idea of being free people, not from the perspective of the church leader, but from the perspective of the people being lead. How can we live as free people without driving each other nuts? What does it even look like to be free people?

Our gospel reading gives us our first clues. Jesus is out with his disciples and they find they're hungry. They stop to pluck and eat some of the wheat or barley from the fields, and run afoul of the teachers of the law. It's not 100% sure which rule they have broken, because Jewish law does allow for picking grains on the sabbath, as long as you don't actually process them. But, for whatever reason the actions of the disciples was incorrect. The Pharisees took Jesus to task over it. He was asked why he let his disciples break the Sabbath. Who did he think he was?

Jesus's reply is pure revolution. First he gives an example from scripture of when King David broke the temple law because his men were starving. And then Jesus goes on to say something that made the Jewish leadership very angry indeed. He points out that God made the rule of keeping the sabbath holy for the benefit of people and didn't create people just so they could keep the rule of the Sabbath. In other words, once following the law starts to harm people rather than protect them, ditch the law!

You can't go around saying stuff like that! Surely?

When you are the leader of a group of people, and you're not sure what they might get up to, the first thing that occurs to us is to come up with a bunch of regulations. As a parent, I'm always doing this.

Because, while we all love them to bits, kids are very skilled in finding new ways to nearly kill themselves, to break your stuff, or to just be flat-out rude. I'm sure that I'm not alone here in finding myself a "rule creator", to try to curb some of that youthful enthusiasm.

Governments do it too. As does the leadership of our groups, clubs and schools. Rules can be a very good thing, but over time some of them can stop being about protecting us, or stopping us from harming others and it becomes a whole thing in itself.

Some of them are kind of funny, like why is it so dreadfully important at Nelson College that your socks are pulled all the way up, all the time? It was the bane of my life, that rule. Socks just drop down just in the simple act of walking from place to place. The rule seemed to exist just so people could stop you and enforce it from time to time and feel important.

A smart leader soon realises that making more and more rules doesn't actually fix the issues. Sure, it buys a bit of peace because the annoying thing stops happening, but it doesn't get you free of the problem itself. In fact you can waste a lot of time and effort enforcing something that doesn't have the desired outcome. If people aren't with you, then it's pretty hard to get them to do what you want.

There is another, deeper layer. Beyond rules and regulations. It's the much tougher layer of relationships.

This was the level that Jesus was working on. Making sure we have a day a week where we stop... really stop, and take some time to bond with our family and to focus back on God. This is a very healthy thing. It's why God asked the nation of Israel to do it. It's not great for business, which is why we're seeing it slowly being eroded away in our current era, but it IS good for us.

Jesus wasn't negating the need for the Sabbath, just the strict enforcing of the Sabbath rules to the point it was doing harm. It's very much a spirit of the law vs the letter of the law kind of thing. Jesus was consistent with this, all the way through his ministry. People first, then things.

And his approach is brought into even sharper relief with the story of the man with a withered hand. This man had lived with this disability all his life. It meant he couldn't work in an era when all work was physical. He was reduced to begging. Jesus saw him and stopped to heal him. He couldn't see why, on a day that was meant to benefit people, he shouldn't do something that would turn this man's life upside-down and make a real difference. He knew the pharisees were looking to trap him again, and so he preempts things, asking them a question. What's better on the sabbath? Is it better to do harm, or to do good?

The Pharisees are a bit stuck by this question. Who on earth is going to say that it's better to do harm? That's clearly not the right answer. But they don't want to condone working on the sabbath either. And a healing, no matter how miraculous, is work. So they take the only option they can. They refuse to answer, effectively refusing the man healing.

It's the only time in the Bible where it specifically states that Jesus was angry. We can infer it at other times (like the money changers in the temple), but on this occasion there is no ambiguity - Jesus was angry and frustrated with their hardness. The relationship with God had broken down. The Pharisees refused to see it, but people are much more important than following the letter of the law, so Jesus immediately reached out and healed the man.

Great, so as free people we don't necessarily have to conform to the law! It's sounding interesting eh? Let's keep moving though...

On to our Galatians reading.

The Galatians were Gauls that had settled in the northern part of modern-day Turkey. They were Celtic people, so think Asterix and Obelix and you're probably not too far off. They were non-Jewish Christians, or Gentiles and at this point they had got themselves bogged down with rules and regulations - they were basically arguing about how much of the Jewish law they should be following. Some thought it should be all of it, including getting everyone circumcised. As you can imagine there were others who wondered whether it all was strictly necessary - You can imagine the conversation: "Steady on there man, I mean, do we ALL have to get circumcised?"

I've just noticed all the fellas have just crossed their legs :-)

Paul's letter was written to address their concerns and to set them straight on a few things. Including the value of following the laws in order to be saved. At the end of the letter Paul gives this beautiful little lesson on being free, and how free people ought to behave.

I'm sure we've all heard this passage from Galatians loads and loads of times. And the words have entered our Christian jargon. I also feel that they have potentially become a little meaningless over time. So I've chosen to read a selected pieces to you again, but I'm going to use The Message, just to put a different spin on the words and see if we can't come at the text from another direction. This is Paul spelling out how we should be living as free people: "It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out — in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?"

He goes on to say that we have to be careful not to give in to the desires of the flesh. We've come to associate that word "flesh" with very specific types of sin, but what Paul's getting at here is our own human nature. Left to our own devices humanity can be awful.

I'm mean not us, obviously. We all seem like such a lovely bunch - well, except me. I've seen the inside of my own head. Left to my own devices, I can be awful too. I'm also willing to bet that I'm not the only one in this room that feels that way.

Paul lists out the problems that come from following our own human nature, unfortunately, we haven't figured a way to solve any of these nearly 2000 years later. Again, reading from the Message: "Repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and

emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community."

This is what exercising our freedom descends into if we don't pay attention to the God stuff. We can legislate against these things in our communities and churches, but it won't protect us from our own human weakness.

Just because you can, doesn't mean you should. And with our freedom comes responsibility and danger.

As free people, we're making our own choices.

We're working on a deeper level - we're working on that relationship level. And relationships can be difficult. My friend Scott used to say "Things are easy. People are hard"

If that seems a little daunting then Paul does offer us some hope . A spirit-filled life-line to drag us out of our own mess. By living God's way all sorts of other things start to appear in our life. Like fruit growing in an orchard.

And this stuff is the gold! Again, quoting the Message: "affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely." It's the opposite of the list above, and I can't help thinking, if we all lived this way there would be no need of any rules and regulations eh?

There's some very good news wrapped up in all this: God wants us to have a relationship with him. A proper getting-to-know each other, caring, loving relationship. And you can't really do relationships by the book. Think of a really special friendship. Could you have got to that point by following instructions? They don't really work that way do they? Relationships take time, effort and a willingness to give way and put the needs of the other before ourselves. God's up for it, so how are we keeping our side of the relationship?

The other bit of good news is that by keeping our relationship with God solid, it can't help but flow out into the other aspects of our life - our relationships with the people around us. That's what real communities are built on.

This is what Paul was trying to tell the Galatians, and this is what Jesus was trying to get across to the Pharisees. Following the letter of the law, no matter how devout you are is not the way to forge a relationship with God. If we want to live fruitfully as free people then we have to do it by serving God, and by extension serving each other, before ourselves.

Can YOU identify some little windows of opportunity around you? Small acts of kindness or generosity, unexpected and undeserved? We've been given this awesome gift, and it definitely works best if we pass it around a bit.

Grab any opportunity with both hands to get alongside people and look after them. Even what seems like a small, insignificant thing can make a big difference in someone's life. [example from Fiona]

So, thinking back to the earlier quote about free people being difficult to lead. Are we actually difficult? I can't really answer that because I'm not the one with the job of leader, but I think it's worth us really mulling over and being aware of.

Are we plugged in to a spirit filled base from which those amazing fruit will grow? Are we prepared to sacrifice our own egos, ideas, traditions or even our favourite seat to serve the needs of others? Can we support and love each other, especially the people who we find difficult to love?

My friend Spanky maintains that the church is becoming counter-cultural in a bunch of ever more irrelevant ways. Can we be counter-cultural in ways that matter, exercising our freedom not to get ourselves ahead, but to make sure others get a shot at living life to the full?

From where I stand the fruits of the spirit are strongly in evidence in this parish. But that doesn't mean that we can't use the occasional spiritual refill. And as Paul advises us, we use our freedom not for our own gratification, but to serve one another in love. Freedom works best when you pass it on to others. From there the love and freedom spills out into the world around us, cascading right down the hill, and into Richmond!

Let's pray,

Father,

You sent your Son to bring good news to the poor,
sight to the blind, and... freedom to captives.

Anoint us with your Spirit;

Rouse us to work in his name:

And help us to bear fruit that we can share with those around us.

Amen