

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – 2019

Isaiah 66:10-14, Galatians 6:7-18, Luke 10:1-12, 17-24.

It has been interesting this week to hear Jesuit and Human Rights Lawyer Fr Frank Brennan speak on the issue of religious freedom. If I understand him correctly he is not a proponent of a Religious Freedoms Act and I tend to agree with him. When asked why there was a push for this kind of legislation, he suggested that it was born out of a perceived marginalisation of religion in the marketplace of ideas. He cited the Royal Commission and the changes to the Marriage Act as being events which have made some folk mount what he described as a rear-guard action. Whilst I cannot speak for other religious traditions. I would suggest that for us as Christians to endeavour to seek the protection of the law will not help us further our cause and may even be antithetical to our calling.

If I was to ask you what is the greatest of the Christian parables. I wonder what you'd say. Almost certainly most of you would turn to the New Testament, as I would: the Good Samaritan perhaps or the Prodigal Son, the lost coin or sheep or any of the other great stories. In the theological world, both east and west, one of the greatest parables is considered to be that of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov. The great French Dominican Friar, priest and ecumenist Yves Congar claimed that every theologian should read it annually.

In the parable Jesus returns to the City of Seville when the inquisition is in full swing and the Grand Inquisitor locks him up at once, denouncing the disastrous consequences of the freedom for which he stood on earth. He tells Jesus that such freedom is so unsuited to most people, and contrasts it with the controlled order and happiness that the Church has created. The masses he says have brought us their freedom and obediently laid it at our feet. Throughout the parable Jesus says nothing but in the end kisses the Inquisitors aged lips and goes away.

Over these past few weeks we have been hearing from St Paul's letter to the Galatians. It has been fascinating to hear Paul writing to a group of folk who have embraced the Christian faith and have found in it a liberty they had not formerly enjoyed. Freedom from the law, a law which impacted every part of their lives. In it he writes: You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, the freedom for which Christ has set us free. Writing to the Corinthians he tells them 'where the Spirit of the Lord is there is Freedom.' Paul broadens his horizons in Romans the whole creation is to enjoy 'the glorious liberty of the children of God.' Indeed the letter to the Galatians has been called the 'Magna Carta of Christian Liberty.'

Now it could be argued that have never been slaves to the law therefore the letter has little to say to us. But I think that would be wrong. Paul is often derided as being non PC in so many ways. Folk do tend to hone in on

comments about women, sexuality and the like, the hot button topics of our day. But I would suggest to you that Paul in his day was advocating a new way, it was radical and he found plenty of opposition from folk such as Peter and James back in Jerusalem. Galatians and Paul's teaching on freedom is important for us today when we consider the freedom that we enjoy. But it is a particular freedom one we need to be mindful of in our age when many are seeking freedom from what they see as the constraints of gender, sexuality, age, race, disability or whatever; whilst others are seeking freedom to express themselves without constraint.

Jesus in the journey narrative that we hearing at present from Luke is exhibiting a very particular type of freedom. Jesus has set his face to return to Jerusalem, knowing this is the place of his destiny. He has freed himself from the constraints of home, family even social convention and he asked his followers to do the same. Those he sent ahead of him were unencumbered by even the barest necessities: 'Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals' he says. Those who go ahead of Jesus bear his name, they personify the one who has sent them. This freedom business is costly.

Paul too reminds his readers that whilst they are no longer slaves to the law they are now slaves to Christ. And in Galatians he can see the problems that this freedom has created and he urges caution: For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, and then takes the argument another step further: but through love become slaves to one another. For, he goes on, the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. We can see in this passage the paradox inherent in Christian freedom: become slaves to one another.

As the dust settles over our tax cuts I am sure the government will turn next towards to the thorny issue of religious freedom and I wonder if many are seeking freedoms without cost. In this context I am not completely convinced by George Bernard Shaw's assertion that 'liberty means responsibility' or Edmund Burke's claim that 'liberty must be limited in order to be possessed.' But I can feel the principled pragmatist in me emerging as I try and wrestle with this difficult issue. I am not convinced that seeking to legislate for freedom is the right way for us to proceed. Returning to Dostoevsky's Inquisitor, in regards freedom, he accused Christ of 'burdening the human soul with its torments.' Tormented we are it seems and perhaps that reflects something of the difficulty we face in articulating the nature of Christian freedom or indeed being prepared to bear the cost that it entails.

We heard the close of Paul's letter to the Galatians this morning. He sounds rather wearied by them and their willingness to give up the freedom that he has preached to them. He tells them that he bears the

stigmata of Jesus branded on his body. We don't know whether Paul is speaking literally or figuratively, whether they are marks on his body or his soul. But quite clearly for Paul our freedom has been won by the cross of Christ the act of love par excellence. Paul bears the marks of crucifixion which won that freedom, it was won at a cost and the question remains whether we are able to share in that cost. Paul's 'glorious liberty' is vital for Christianity but it not painless. Amen.