

Sunday between 26th June and 2nd July [13]

Luke 9:51-62

Our collect this morning sums up the theme for our readings in the words "God, Whose service is perfect freedom". It sounds paradoxical, wrong to our hearing but it is a phrase used in prayers a fair bit, serving God is perfect freedom. How can anything that causes us to be in service be free? And what is the purpose of the additional label of perfect on the concept of freedom, either we are free or we are not free, surely it's a binary term, one thing or the other, in or out, free or not free.

Well it's not that surprising that the Church has come up with some pretty tricky prayers and theologies when you look at Jesus' ministry and get used to the sort of counter-intuitive things that he was doing all of the time. Look at the gospel reading we just heard, It begins with Jesus approaching a Samaritan town, a place Jews are in enmity with and regularly avoid crossing territory, so rather unsurprisingly, the townspeople were not that keen to receive Jesus and his big crowd of followers, particularly as they knew the motivation was simply to pass through on the way to Jerusalem. The differences in religious interpretation between Jews and Samaritans made Jerusalem a bit of a sore spot, not unlike today where that city is a physical focus for religious dispute.

Now the disciples feel affronted by this message that they are not welcome, they are followers of Jesus and they have seen him do mighty acts of power and so they express their anger with the suggestion that a little bit heavenly fire might teach the Samaritans some manners, but Jesus is unwilling to retaliate. This is what they had come to expect from Jesus, to behave in the opposite way to their own gut instinct.

Then later, the paradoxes get even more difficult to follow, Jesus is approached by a man wishing to follow him, and he does everything to put him off. The man is full of enthusiasm, I will follow you wherever you go he says, but Jesus warns him that he hasn't really got anywhere to go, this life he leads is unstable, without comforts, not really something he'd ask someone else to share in. Then, immediately, Jesus sees a different person and says to him, Follow me. What! 1 minute ago we were putting people off following Jesus, now we are commanding them to do just that. Not only that but this person has a good reason stay at home, at least for a little longer. He has to bury his father, we are told. Not that his father is dead, we must understand, in this culture had the father died he would already have been in the process of the funeral, it all happens straight away and certainly within 24 hours, no this man is saying my father is very old and/or sick and I have to put my responsibility for caring for him first. Jesus is not persuaded.

Then he asks another person to follow him, and this person wants to do one very understandable thing, he wants to go and say goodbye to his family. It's not really surprising, just walking off with Jesus would have caused his family undue worry, in many ways it would have been completely at odds with Jesus' own message of love. Abandoning a family is a pretty unloving thing to do.

So what was at the bottom of these conversations, was Jesus looking for new recruits or was he showing people what it is that prevents them from truly following him? We never get to find out if these men ignore Jesus' advice or take it, whether they follow him or go back to their families. The sense we get is that in fact none of them follow Jesus because they are not ready for that type of service, they are not ready to free themselves from the constraints of their lives or society's expectations and put Jesus and his ministry first. That's not to say that there is nothing they can be doing, in the case of the second call, Jesus ends by sending the man home to proclaim the gospel so it seems he has a ministry in his own locality, but to be a disciple of Jesus in the same way as the people who travelled with him was not really something these people were ready for.

They would have to give up so much in order to be a follower, that doesn't look all that free. Of course the disciples were free in many ways, free from working they were financially supported, free from the tedium of domestic life, they were on an adventure, free from the law, Jesus led them into many behaviours that were condemned by the religious authorities. Yet this freedom didn't always look all that attractive from the outside. You see we think of freedom as being able to do whatever we want, and in some ways that's right, but when these followers of Jesus received their freedom in Christ what they wanted to do, that which they were now free to do, didn't look much like what people imagined they would want to do with such freedom.

This is the crux of what St. Paul is trying to say to the Galatians. We are free, but if we have been freed by the spirit, that is we haven't just decided to stop conforming with the rules but have in fact come to know and accept the grace by which God sets us free, then we will bear the fruits of the spirit. If we just stop obeying the rules because we don't want to do that anymore we will be likely to fall into the first list, the freedoms of the flesh. Temptation to self-indulgence is something we all face, even Jesus, and it's something we will likely fall into from time to time, like the anger that drove the disciples to suggest fiery rain on the Samaritan town, but it is not the guiding of the spirit that takes us down this road.

Not that by giving in to these temptations we are abandoned by the spirit, we are not, Jesus didn't abandon his angry disciples, he taught them a better way. So we don't lose our freedom by making mistakes, we must remember that. But when we turn to the spirit, when we recognise our failings and that which draws us to selfish desires rather than spiritual desires, then we are open once again to teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and our response to that, should we heed it will be to bear the fruits of the spirit, it can't be anything else.

That is what St Paul is telling us, it's not that we have to do these spiritual things in order to be loved by God but rather when we accept God's love we will be changed by it and that change in us will look like acts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. The fruits of the spirit are a consequence of God's love not a pre-requisite to obtain God's love. We cannot control who God loves, either by endearing ourselves to God or by behaving in a repulsive way, how arrogant of us to think that we can! We have a simple choice, ignore and reject God's love to us or embrace that love and be transformed by it. And not just once, but over and over again, be transformed as we face setbacks and challenges, by the love that endures.

That is perfect freedom, the freedom to choose. The service part is simply what happens when we make a choice to follow Jesus. It is not a choice to serve, the serving is a consequence, and that too is perfect because it validates and gives form to the expression of the overwhelming love we have come to know. In a world where there is so much anger, so many disputes and where the consequences of fear and hatred are clear for all to see on the news, we need more of this love. But we cannot force it on another, like the Samaritan town, a show of force would have made love impossible. Perfect freedom must be maintained, as it is only with the freedom to reject that the true value of accepting God's love can be shown.