

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon 14th March 2021

Lent 4

St Mary's 8 am

Galatians 4.21 ff

There is an enigmatic proclamation in today's epistle. 'But Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all'. Free is an enticing word and freedom is one of the great slogans of humanity, particularly over the last 250 years, but it covers a multitude of meanings, so let us pick our way carefully to a Christian understanding.

First we are free in the sense that, within limits, we are free to choose. I stress 'within limits' because not only are we constrained by circumstances, we know more and more how our behaviour is shaped by our past and, especially, by our genes. Nevertheless within tight limits there are genuine choices to be made. We are not robots.

Secondly, there is freedom from oppressive external restraints, as when we say we want freedom for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in Iran, or for the Uighers in China.

But there is another kind of freedom well captured in the phrase 'whose service is perfect freedom' There is a wonderful prayer of St Augustine which goes

O thou who are the light of the minds that know thee,

The life of the souls that love thee,

The strength of the souls that serve thee:

Help us so to know thee

That we may fully love thee

So to love thee that we fully serve thee

Whose service is perfect freedom .

An example of this kind of freedom might be a musician at the height of their powers playing a piece they have loved and practised over the years, when they are so taken over by the music that their instrument, their body and the music are one sublime sound. They ask for no more. They produce a performance that is never forgotten by those who heard it. That is the kind of freedom St Augustine is talking about-what we might call that sense of total liberation in being what we are and we want to be. It is not at that moment about either choosing or being freed from anything. It is about being so taken over by the music at the heart of the universe that we are fully ourselves and ask no more.

So when later in his letter to the Galatians (5.1) Paul says ‘For freedom Christ has set us free’-it is that freedom he has in mind.

For Paul being set free meant being set free from the burden of having to obey the full Jewish law; set free from a fatalistic view of life; from sin, those factors in our life that block our relationship with God and from the fear of death. In Christ we too are set free from whatever is weighing on our mind. Set free into that perfect freedom.

The Jerusalem which is above is free and we are citizens of that heavenly city. That city is made up of those who fully serve God, and that service is perfect freedom. One way to keep walking its streets is to use that prayer of St Augustine that I quoted earlier. It can, I am sure be found on the internet and it will be on our church web page on Monday. So lets pray it now

O thou who are the light of the minds that know thee,

The life of the souls that love thee,

The strength of the souls that serve thee:

Help us so to know thee

That we may fully love thee

So to love thee that we fully serve thee

Whose service is perfect freedom .