

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 26/6/2016

2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14
Psalm 77:1-2,11-20
Galatians 5:1,13-25
Luke 9:51-62

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Many of you will know the story of Nelson Mandela, the great South African civil rights leader. With his country in the grip of apartheid, established by the Afrikaner minority government of the National Party in 1948, Mandela rose to prominence in his work with the African National Congress (ANC).

Working as a lawyer, he was repeatedly arrested for seditious activities and, in 1962, he was arrested, convicted of conspiracy to overthrow the state, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mandela served 27 years in prison. Amid international pressure and growing fear of a racial civil war, South African President FW de Klerk released him in 1990. The rest, as they say, is history, with Mandela standing in the country's first fully democratic elections, and leading the ANC to victory as he became the first President of South Africa in 1994.

Mandela is famous for many quotes, many of them around the whole idea of liberation, and the equality of all people. However one quote of his rings especially true for me today, in light of our lectionary readings, especially the Gospel passage and the epistle to the Galatians.

Mandela is reported to have been asked, in the days after his release from prison, how he could ever forgive those who had imprisoned him and treated him so badly over the past 27 years. His response was simple when he said, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

Mandela realized that his physical freedom was only a small part of the road ahead, and in a way, only a small part of the full story. His true freedom could only come with the conscious decision to leave behind, to set aside all that bitterness and resentment that could have kept his soul imprisoned and could have held him back from moving forward and enacting the significant change that he was then able to undertake.

Mandela recognized the importance of freedom in his life, and its unique qualities. And today we hear St. Paul writing these words to the church in Galatia: “For freedom Christ has set us free”. And again “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters”.

Now those who were here last Sunday might be a little confused at this point. After all, I spent my entire sermon last week speaking of how we are to submit our lives in authority to God - that it is only in this submission that we begin to discover our true identity as created and loved children of God. In this regard then, how might we also see ourselves as free? Surely submission to anything, especially something like authority is the antithesis of freedom.

Well, the answer to that question I think depends on how we understand this term, “freedom”. For although it might be understood quite narrowly in our society as being to do with autonomy and independence, or in the release from incarceration, our Christian understanding goes further than that.

The freedom Paul envisions here is, in fact, freedom from the law, that institution which Paul sees as being almost incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ, and what he speaks of here is a particular freedom initiated by Christ. So, our freedom comes to us as a result of our being *called* - from having a sense of our lives as more than just to be lived for ourselves, or even for others, but lives lived for God, and for God’s work and witness in the world.

But there remains an undeniable tension - a difficult “space”, if you like, that we need to negotiate between the authority to which we submit ourselves (that I spoke about last week), and this perfect freedom which Paul speaks of today. And in many respects it is the very tension that is found at the very heart of our Gospel passage.

You may think that Jesus’ responses to those who claim that they would become disciples today are unfair and unreasonable - that they in no way carry any sense of the freedom to which Paul refers. And it must be agreed Jesus is blunt - “let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” And “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

But Jesus recognizes the tension that would-be followers of God’s way face in their lives. He understands that so many other competing demands assail us - family, livelihoods, places to live, friendships, and work. But he knows that none of these will truly give us freedom. None of these will lead to that sense of “perfect freedom” to which Paul refers. In fact, Jesus says, this freedom is actually only found by walking God’s way - by leaving behind those other things that entangle us and following Christ as he sets his face towards Jerusalem.

So what does freedom in Christ look like? The answer Paul gives to this question is both profound and exceedingly difficult. First, he reminds us that *Christian* freedom is just that: freedom in Christ, not freedom in and of itself. Because it is Christ who has set human beings free, they are obligated to him, bound to his service. Second, the obligation of those who live in freedom is both an obligation to Christ and an obligation to one another.

This of course is summed up in the reminder to the Galatians of that great commandment “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

There is no doubt that Nelson Mandela understood this well. He is quoted as saying this: “For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Paul says the same thing in another way: “Live by the Spirit”, he urges the Galatians. He then lists the ways in which the character of life in the Spirit is displayed - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In other words, it is only by submitting ourselves to the authority of God in our life, that believers can “live by the Spirit,” which has certain recognizable characteristics (not rules). This leads, then, to the radical insight that those who “belong to Christ Jesus” belong to him completely and can no longer belong to the law or to sin.” So in obedience and submission we actually find our freedom in Christ - so that the fruits of the Spirit may be evident in our lives.

Nelson Mandela said - “Let freedom reign. The sun never set on so glorious a human achievement.” I would be so bold as to deliberately mis-quote the great man here, and to say this: “let freedom in Christ reign - the sun never set on so glorious a divine achievement.”

In the name of Christ. Amen.