

Pentecost VIII (A)  
*Genesis 24.34-67/Romans 7.14-25a /Matthew 11.16-30*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
6 July 2008

### THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN

~Paul H. Friesen~

This is a sermon about freedom, about liberty. This is the direction in which the Scriptures nudge our hearts and minds and actions this morning.

One of the hardest things for two similar people to understand is how they make such different choices. How they raise their children, how they keep their house, and how they spend lots on one thing and scrimp and save on another seems a mystery.

When it comes to different cultures this is exaggerated. The father of a friend of our family was a missionary pastor in an Asian country years ago. He had a carefully arranged library. But one of his assistants, not knowing how to read the English titles of his books thoughtfully rearranged them—by the colours of their spines! Our human decisions when we are given freedom or liberty often run in opposite directions.

In fact *freedom* and *liberty* are hard words to take on board these days for a Christian. On the one hand, at the day-to-day level, these words seem now to be reduced to the idea of 'consumer choice'—what kind of credit card we have with which 'features', which pair of jeans by which maker, which car rental agency to rent from, the precise colour, among 184, to use in repainting our kitchen. This concept of 'consumer choice' can even be extended to choosing a church that fits our tastes, a form of worship that pleases our sensibilities, or a circle of Christian friends that fits our precise profile.

Never in world history have we had so many choices to make about so many less than critical things.

On the other hand, the words *freedom* and *liberty* have gotten all jumbled up with political concepts used in founding the officially secular modern nations of France and the United States of America in the 1700s. Democracy seems like a good idea—and voting a sacred honour. But given the extremely low voter turn out in the United States in 2000 and the split vote, the current President of the most powerful nation in the world was elected to his office by under 25% of the adult citizens of his country. It is very similar elsewhere in the Western world—but we have still not realized what a dead end 'free choice' is when we expect too much of it.

Of course the things I haven't mentioned all do have necessary choices involved. And hopefully we can choose the right things, or the best things, or the lesser of two evils in the appropriate way, with prayer. But that's not the kind of freedom considered by this morning's Scriptures. As it might be put for Christians, Jesus didn't die so that we could get better at making choices. The greatest things done by humanity, the greatest poetry written were accomplished by people who often had very little freedom or liberty by modern standards to make many choices at all.

In the year 1520 the monk and professor of theology known as Martin Luther wrote a book called *The Liberty of the Christian*. For Luther any talk about *freedom* or *liberty* had to begin by talking about God's gift of grace to the whole human race. This is what we need to talk about today.

Our Scriptures today tell the stories of two remarkable people at the margins of the story of Abraham, the great man of faith. They both responded to the divine gift of liberty.

One was Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham's senior servant, his chief of staff who had been at his side for years though he was neither from Abraham's clan nor an inhabitant of the 'promised land'. The other was Rebekah, Abraham's nephew's daughter, from the part of the family that had left the ancient ziggurats of Ur as well yet had not followed Abraham's God to the 'promised land' but settled half way.

Eliezer at one point had been the one whom Abraham had designated his heir, as *Genesis* tells us, since Abraham had no child of his own till much later.<sup>1</sup> But Eliezer, had by now been deprived of the inheritance by Ishmaelites briefly, then both by the beloved Isaac, who was born late in the life of his parents.

And yet Eliezer had a pivotal opportunity, a moment of liberty to respond to God's promise to his master, Abraham, that God would bless the nations of the world through Abraham's son. This was the covenant of grace of which we confess Jesus Christ was the final fulfillment.

Eliezer was entrusted with arranging a marriage for Isaac, the son, the heir. Eliezer offered up his freedom, he freely participated in the fulfilling of God's promise by swearing to Abraham that he would accomplish this. Eliezer went in good faith, and he begged Abraham to consider the complication that the appointed woman might refuse the marriage. All this happened before today's story which begins with a retelling of Eliezer's arrival at the home of Abraham's clan.

Eliezer prays to the 'Lord God' we are told, the covenant name of Abraham's God made known to Abraham by the God of grace, the God who

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<sup>1</sup> *Genesis* 15.2. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless noted.

would bless the world; Eliezer prays for success. And he fulfills his mission bringing home Rebekah to Isaac.

Rebekah, like Eliezer, had very little choice by modern standards. She was not a servant, but she was a woman in the age of Patriarchs. Remarkably she is offered freedom. Remarkably she responds to the offer to marry Isaac, the one through whom the Lord God had promised to bless the world.

We hear then: ‘Isaac took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.’ Remarkably, as we shall see next Sunday, she bears the next generation of the covenant, the children of promise after twenty years of childless marriage.

There was more than the ancient Middle-Eastern opulence in this story—more than the nose rings and the bracelets, the golden and silver jewellery, and more. She went to fulfill the promise of the blessing granted her by her family; ‘May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.’ She responded to the covenant just as Abraham and Sarah had done. She became part of its fulfillment.

The gift of liberty, of freedom, given us by God may only give us one choice in a small space, but it will always be greater than dozens, even hundreds, of choices our world thinks are so important and so urgent. Eliezer and Rebekah knew this. And this is how liberty and freedom is measured by God—by how much our use of it brings true, divine freedom and liberty to others. God’s covenant of grace has never changed.

The problem for so many of us said St. Paul, centuries and centuries later, to the church in Rome, is the distance between God’s promise of liberty and our repeated failures to take up the offer. ‘I do not understand my own actions,’ he said, ‘for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...Wretched man that I am!’ We have all had this experience, perhaps even this morning. It seems to make a mockery of the whole idea of human freedom.

The Apostle Paul, at the end of this anguished passage of Scripture, finds his liberty: ‘Who shall deliver me? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’

What did the Apostle mean? I don’t think he meant that baptized Christians were guaranteed freedom from sin. He did mean that whenever we turn to Jesus Christ in a hard place or a hard time, whenever we turn to the liberator of humanity, we shall find our true liberty.

Today’s Gospel begins with an ancient children’s rhyme, sung out between groups of children camped between the stalls of the marketplace, laughing

and teasing each other: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn!'

But the children's game becomes sinister when played by adults, when what Jesus calls 'this generation' holds a flame to the feet of those who dare to speak the truth, and says 'jump, when we say so'. Jesus said: 'For John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man (Jesus) came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"'

When John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord by calling for fasting and repentance he was squeezed by the critics for being too harsh. When Jesus arrived and offered grace to notorious sinners by eating and drinking with them, by sharing his life with them, Jesus was squeezed by the critics for being too lax.

But Jesus was saying a whole lot more than, 'You know, you just can't win!' Jesus was saying that his freedom and John's liberty weren't based on the crowd's reaction, that freedom and liberty were a gift from God, not permission granted from critics. If we look for freedom from powerful people of bad faith, the spaces we will be given for choosing will have very little value. We should not get distracted by this. These spaces will have little value in comparison with the liberty granted us by the God who loved us into existence and opens up great avenues of divine grace, as he did for Jesus Christ even as Christ hung on the cross.

What is it that is hidden from the crafty politician and the wise philosopher, but as Jesus put it, is 'revealed to infants'? 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' This is where liberty and freedom are found.

We don't find liberty and freedom by responding to limited choices offered us by huge corporations or mean little supervisors. Such choices have to be made. But thanks be to God that divine liberty is ours as well. This is the big story for us, like it was for Eliezer and Rebekah, the Apostle Paul, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ himself, God's great gift, the liberator. But how is a yoke, the great wooden restraint put on oxen so they can drag a plow—how is this related to freedom? It was common among the pious to talk of the 'yoke of the law'—to take on the spiritual life in conformity with the law handed down to Moses by God. But the great law of Moses, related in the book of *Exodus* that we call the 'Ten Commandments' and have written on tablets beside our own Holy Table here at St. Paul's—this was introduced by one critical verse that often has been missed.

Moses relayed God's liberty to the people: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; [therefore] you shall...and you shall not.'<sup>2</sup> That great hymn of praise to this covenant, *Psalm* 119, puts it this way: 'I will run the way of your commandments, for you have set my heart at liberty.'<sup>3</sup> This is the kind of yoke that Jesus described, the yoke that the redeemer of the world brought, that through it offered us liberty.

Children understand it as they hand you their backpack and put their hand in an adult's hand to walk across a busy street.

This is the liberty we are offered; to put our hand in the hand of Christ, to put our burdens on Christ's shoulders. We are not compelled—we are offered it. This yoke is light, even when choices become quite difficult or are taken away from us all together, by sickness or death or accident; by friends, or families, or enemies. Even in anguish we have freedom.

The yoke is as easy as the bread and wine on our lips. There are no strings attached. We can reject Christ's liberty and take off the yoke for heavier loads. But we have the freedom God has granted us to leave on Christ's easy yoke, Christ's light burden, and rest on Christ' love. We have that sort of choice every minute of every day. And we have that freedom right now.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Exodus* 20.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Psalm* 119.32, as translated in the Psalter of *The Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), p. 870.