

You were Called to be Free

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Preacher: Stephen Hale

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of October 2004. The preacher is Bishop Stephen Hale.

His sermon is entitled, You Were Called to be Free, and is based on Galatians 5, verses 13-26.

It's great to be here at Holy Trinity again tonight for this special service of confirmation. I understand there may be some people here from Diamond Creek as well who are hearing this confirmation sermon for the second time this year, so I'm terribly sorry about that.

But if you're the bishop of the Eastern region, you do as many confirmations as I do. You might have heard this too, Michael. You never know. You're lucky in a good inner city. But they do vary from week to week, I can assure you, because I can never quite remember what I said last time.

Paul Bach is probably far too modest to have acknowledged this, but Paul gave one of the four Bible studies at the recent General Synod in Fremantle. Did you mention this to your parishioners?

[1 : 0 5] Probably not. Far too modest. And it was an excellent Bible study. He was commended by many liberal Catholic bishops who thought it was wonderful. So it was obviously... No, no, seriously.

It was very warmly received by a very diverse range of people, which meant that actually Paul obviously dealt with the text, which was encouraging, because you couldn't have said that about some of the others. But it was an excellent study, and he really encouraged us in God's Word as part of what we did at the General Synod together.

Well, tonight we're thinking about the quest for freedom, and you'd have to say we live in an age when lots and lots of people are incredibly desirous of being free people. And in a sense, the desire to be free is, I think, one of the sort of key expressions of what it's like to live in the world in which we currently live.

And in a sense, partly because of our affluence, we're in a position where we can be relatively free in a whole lot of ways, in which in previous eras probably wasn't the case, because people didn't have the financial resources to do the sort of stuff they want to do in the way that people want to do things these days.

Because if you think about it, we live in a sort of a no-limits type culture. If you want to go somewhere, you can generally go there. If you want to actually be a certain sort of person, to some extent you can choose to do that. And if you don't like the way you are, then you can actually get that sorted out as well.

[2 : 2 3] In terms of sexuality, you can be bi or straight, or you can actually have a mix of those things, or you can actually be gay, whatever you prefer to be. You can express it whichever way you want to be. I'm reflecting on culture at this point, not presenting a position on this issue, which we did spend, it seems, a lot of time talking about at General Synod.

So we live in a world where people don't want a lot of limits or restrictions imposed on them. And that expresses itself in all sorts of ways. And in a sense, in the world in which we live, because of our financial affluences, I was just saying, science can sort out the things that you don't particularly like about yourself.

I was recently reading an article in a women's magazine. You may wonder what I was doing reading a women's magazine. Well, most men read women's magazines when they're waiting to get their hair cut, or they're in doctor's surgeries, or in this case, I was waiting to get my car fixed.

And this particular article that really struck me was about a man in Sydney who was a single person in his mid-30s. He decided he probably wasn't likely to get married, and he'd always wanted to have children. So through the Internet, he was able to find someone to act as the donor for his sperm, or sorry, to be as the person to provide the eggs, so his sperm would be implanted in this person's eggs.

And then he flew to America, and through the Internet, he found someone who was willing to be the surrogate mother for his child. He was incredibly successful because he ended up having triplets. And I was reading this article about this man living at home in Sydney with his triplets, thinking, my goodness, you know, it was bad enough having one child, and there were two of us, let alone having triplets.

[3 : 49] But science had been able to sort out this particular man's problems. As you may know, in Australia, there's a very large number of unwanted pregnancies that are terminated every year, something like well over 100,000, in an era when, in a sense, preventative actions have never been more freely available.

It's still an amazing number of babies that are terminated in our particular culture. These days, of course, if you don't like the way you look, science can sort that out, and you can actually have your body cosmetically altered and feature in a television program to become the person that you've always wanted to be.

I read last year about two boys who were both 14 who both really liked Brad Pitt, and they both decided to get themselves altered so they could look like Brad Pitt. Kind of weird, don't you think, really, if they were friends in that way, but that's what they did, and they did look kind of like Brad Pitt when they'd had themselves altered in that way.

So in a sense, you can be the sort of person you want to be living in the world in which we currently live, and that's the sort of no-limits culture that we're caught up in. I came across a thing called the dot-com manifesto a couple of years ago that in a sense captured something of the revolution that we're all living through in this dot-com era that we live in.

And this manifesto goes like this. We will have happy families. We will always be entertained. We will have countless friends. We will be rich. We will know everything. We'll shop till we'll drop.

[5 : 05] We'll work as we please. We will run the country. And last but not least, we will be beautiful. You have to say that in a sense does capture, I think, some of the aspirations of some people living in our community in terms of the sort of people they'd like to be.

Well, if you live in this sort of no-limits type world where people are really going after a great quest for freedom, you'd have to say that we also live in an era that's highly addictive, whether it's to gambling or smoking or to sex or to fitness or work or drugs or travel or sport, to pornography and all of the pervasive impact of that in our community, whether it's downloading music.

I've got a 14-year-old son who's just turned 14 and he seems to spend a lot of time downloading music off the internet. I'm not quite sure when he ever listens to it, but he seems to be obsessed with downloading stuff off the internet in that way and I think lots of boys tend to be like that.

Whether it's mobile phones and talking on your mobile phones. I don't know if you've noticed or not, but one of the latest phenomena is that people, when they're together, seem to spend a lot of time texting other people when they're together rather than communicating with each other.

Have you noticed that? So you'll see groups of teenagers together and they're all texting other people rather than actually talking to each other. I've only just worked out how to text. So, you know, I can't really get caught up in that because I'm so slow at texting.

[6 : 18] It takes me about a week to do a one-line statement sentence. Well, other people just do it so fast. So we live in an amazingly addictive age. I mean, we've just had a tragic situation in the Anglican Church where one of our priests was one of the people who was arrested because I presume he had a particular addiction to pornography and was caught because he'd purchased some stuff and was arrested because of that, which has been an incredibly embarrassing and unhappy circumstance for us.

But that is, I guess, illustrative of the addictive age in which we live. So you'd have to say that, in a sense, freedom pursued as an end in itself can actually become one of the most strongest forms of entrapment around.

Where does that leave us, in a sense, tonight? Because tonight a number of people are going to stand before us and they're going to declare a commitment to Jesus Christ. And they're going to stand before us and say, I turn to Christ, which is a sign that they're giving their lives to Christ.

And as well as that, they're turning away from or repenting from their sinful lives, which we've already, in a sense, confessed together in this service. A lot of people in the wider community, I think if you did a survey, wouldn't think that those people are going to be embracing a lifestyle of freedom.

And in fact, I would think a lot of people in the wider community would think that what these people are taking on board tonight is another form of entrapment. And in fact, a lot of people might actually think that they're taking on board a really high-level form of entrapment because they would think that becoming a Christian and expressing that in that way is an incredibly restrictive thing to impose upon yourself.

[7 : 46] You see, those people, lots of people out there would perceive that these people are going to become incredibly religious people. They're going to have to sort of take on a whole lot of religious obligations because they've chosen to be a Christian person.

As well as that, a lot of other people would think that they're taking on board a whole lot of Christian standards and behaviours, incredibly restrictive things, not lying or not stealing or not sleeping around or not getting drunk or actually incredibly restrictive if you're a teenager having to respect your parents.

I mean, that's incredibly restrictive, isn't it? And a very onerous thing to take on board for yourself. And yet other people would suggest that these people in making a Christian commitment are going to be permanently psychologically screwed up for the rest of their lives because the church is very good at making people feel guilty about themselves and their lives and this isn't really a healthy way to live.

Church, we ought to be more positive about ourselves. So are these people taking on a new form of restriction and are they going to be burdening themselves with a terrible series of things in their lives?

When I was in Fremantle, one of the personal highlights which Paul missed out on because he went out with some other people was on the one evening they gave us free in the seven days and seven nights we were stuck in this room at General Synod as an act of endurance and as Paul would know, I was in there for every session listening to every part of every debate while reading the Australian newspaper and Paul was my guide through the General Synod because he sat next to me and I used to refer to him fairly regularly and say, where are we now?

[9 : 10] And when we come to the vote, just tell me which way I could vote. He was extremely helpful and guided me at many points. But on the one free evening we had, some of us went off to dinner and then on the way back we actually stopped at a pub and had a drink because some of the people that were in our group were staying at this particular hotel.

And when we were at the pub having a drink on the way out there was this young man sitting there with his girlfriend and he said, where are you guys from? And I said, we're from Melbourne and he said, what are you doing here? And I explained that we were here for the General Synod of the Anglican Church and he said, what on earth is that?

And I tried to explain the mysteries of the General Synod in a simple way and he said, what do you do? And I said, I'm a bishop and he said, oh really, what's that? And so I tried to explain what a bishop is and what bishops do and then he said, that must mean you believe in God.

I said, yeah, they pay me to believe in God. And then he said, well, what do you make of the fact that my mother's dying of emphysema and she's in a hospital in Melbourne and we ended up having an incredibly heavy and serious conversation.

And I guess one of the nice things about that particular conversation was that as we sort of talked about who God is and in a sense how God sees the world and how that impacts on his situation that he could actually see that it wasn't nearly as negative as he perceived it might be and that there were actually some answers to some of the things that were happening in his lives.

[10 : 25] And if it hadn't been for the fact that his girlfriend was smoking a joint and getting increasingly sort of agitated, we might have ended up making a bit more progress but it was certainly a significant conversation. Well, in Galatians chapter 5 verses 1 and then again in verse 13, St. Paul says, it's for freedom that Christ has set us free.

And in verse 13 he says, you my brothers and sisters were called to be free. So Paul's suggesting that for us who are Christian we've actually entered into a new situation of freedom.

And what does Paul mean by that? Well, what Paul is wanting to suggest I guess is having described it before in Galatians is that human beings without Christ are tied up in a situation where they're literally bound by their own sinfulness and their own selfishness.

They're living in a situation where they're in a sense consumed by themselves and living for themselves. And that leads to a situation where you end up having a whole lot of expressions of negative things happening in your life such as were read in that list of things that were read out to us in Galatians 5.

A whole lot of negative stuff that goes on in people's lives and that happens in the wider community. So Paul's suggesting that in a sense life without Christ is a life lived entrapped and enslaved to yourself.

[11 : 37] Living in such a situation that you're seeking to please yourself seeking to actually look after yourself and seeking to gratify yourself. Now this isn't to suggest that people who don't know Christ are completely selfish and live really, really bad lives.

But what Paul's saying is that people without Christ are people who have an incredibly strong tendency to live for themselves and to be entrapped in seeking stuff for themselves and their own self-concern.

And what he says is that in Christ we're liberated and we're set free from that selfishness and that self-preoccupation and God in a sense frees us up so that we're no longer living for ourselves but we're living for someone else because God actually forgives us, he reconciles us to himself and he brings us into a new situation where we're liberated to live in a new way, not living for ourselves but living for Christ and seeking to serve him.

And so we're liberated from following a set of rules which some people perceive Christianity is about. We're liberated from having to seek to be religious which is another perception that some people have about Christian faith and we're liberated from seeking to please God as if he's some slavish person that we have to do a whole lot of things to keep happy.

So in Christ we're liberated and set free and brought into a new situation. There's a film that's been around recently called Touching the Void I don't know if anybody here has seen it or not.

[12 : 56] It's a docudrama and it's about two men whose names are Simon and Joe who were the first people to conquer a mountain in Peru called the Silo West face of an incredibly steep mountain peak as part of the Andes group in Peru.

The film goes back and in a sense recreates what happened to these two particular men. Now I guess if you know anything about mountain climbing which I don't know much about at all I would have assumed that the hardest part of climbing of mountain climbing especially extreme mountain climbing was actually conquering the peak and getting to the top.

You would assume that's the hardest part wouldn't you? Getting to the top in the first place. Well as this film depicts the easy part was actually conquering the peak the hardest part was getting back down again and in fact apparently 80% of major accidents that occur on peak mountain climbing isn't going up it's actually getting back down off the mountain once you've conquered the peak and that's what this particular story is about.

So there's these two men there's Simon and there's Joe that conquered the peak and they start making their descent down the side of this particularly steep mountain on an incredibly perilous base that's shifting snow at very high altitude and as they're making their way down Joe falls and breaks his leg and his leg is in fact so badly broken that the lower bone of his leg is poking through his kneecap and so any movement is excruciatingly painful and so what are they going to do?

Well they decide that the only way forward is to actually strap Joe's leg so that it's at least immobilised and the pain's reduced and Simon starts to act as a sort of a ballet type person who anchors himself in the side of the face as best he could and through a rope being lowered starts to lower Joe down the side of the mountain with Joe sliding on his backside that goes okay for a while and then suddenly Simon's in a situation where he in a sense has this rope pouring through his fingers and there's a sudden jolt because Joe it seems has fallen over another crevice and is now suspended in midair and so what again is Joe going to do because he's this incredible sorry Simon going to do here he is holding on to this guy Joe who's somehow 300 metres down below him suspended in thin air and he's got no other alternative because in a sense he himself is being dragged down the side of the mountain because of the weight of Joe hanging over the precipice they can't communicate with each other because they're so far apart even though they were both screaming at each other in the course of this incredibly acute situation well in what turns out to be an incredibly controversial act amongst mountaineers

[15 : 21] Simon decides that his only option is to cut the rope and in cutting the rope he knows that he's condemning his friend Joe to instant death as he plummets down into the crevice to his death now I'm not going to tell you the end of the movie because I told the end of the movie last year after The Matrix had come out at the 5 o'clock congregation at St Hillary's and they'd never invited me back because I was so upset about that I didn't think it was terribly controversial because in The Matrix the key character dies so many times and comes back to life again I just thought it was pretty obvious but in this particular case here we have Simon who's cut this rope and his friend he presumes has plummeted to his death as the film goes on and I'm only going to give a little bit away ultimately this act of cutting the rope meant that he himself saved his own life because he was able to get to the base of the mountain but through a fairly miraculous act Joe himself was able to be saved now you might be sitting there thinking that's an incredibly acute sort of story and an amazing situation and my life's pretty ordinary compared to that sort of situation and certainly my life's pretty ordinary compared to that situation but I guess the main point

I want to make out of that story is that in order to actually save his own life as well as to ultimately save his friend's life Simon had to cut the rope and in a sense Christ is saying to us tonight that on our own each of us are caught up with and bound up in sin and its consequences and that leads to a situation where we're living lives that are actually restricted we're living lives that are entrapped and we're living lives where we're caught up in ourselves and caught up in a cycle of seeking to please ourselves and in a cycle of selfishness and self-concern and the Christian experience is that Christ if we're prepared to ask him comes and actually cuts the rope so that we're liberated and we're set free and we're brought into a whole new situation which means that we're given life by God and we're given freedom by Christ and we're brought into a new situation where we stand in a new place facing a new future and that's why Paul goes on to the same says here that in Christ we've been set free you my brothers and sisters are free in Christ we're in a whole new situation and Paul goes on to say that you my brothers and sisters were called to be free but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature rather serve one another in love you see that's an incredibly simple summary of the whole

Christian experience to some extent isn't it we've been set free in Christ we've been liberated and because of that we don't choose to live in a selfish way any longer we choose to live in a new way whereas Christ's free slaves or free servants we actually seek to serve him and we express that by living a life of love and that's one of the really dynamic I think liberating aspects of being a Christian person we're no longer living for ourselves because Christ has set us free and liberated us and we're liberated to live in a new way because we're not living for ourselves we're living for him and we're expressing that by serving others as part of that freedom in Galatians chapter 5 verse 6 in the same chapter Paul says the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love you see the whole Christian message is about faith in Christ and that's lived out through loving actions on behalf of Christ as we seek to serve him now you can in a sense argue that serving Christ is pretty simple stuff it's expressed in loving actions it's expressed in the context of God's people as we seek to serve Christ in that context and it's expressed in the radical commitment of not living for ourselves but of living for Christ and seeking to serve him as we live our lives day by day in the world that he's created it's expressed in practical actions of caring for people of praying for or with people of using our God given gifts in the context of the congregation of God's people as we seek to serve Christ of using our particular talents so that we actually make the world in which we live a better place by little daily acts of love and devotion as we seek to serve him and use our skills as people participating in this world it's about being willing to actually be generous with the financial bounty that God's blessed us with so that through that financial bounty we're able to make a difference in other people's lives through the local church and through supporting other groups and causes in particular ways and it's about all those things that Paul talks about when he talks about the fruit of the spirit living a life that's evidenced by love and joy and peace and patience and kindness all those things that we'd love to see expressed in our world in a much bigger way than is often often the case and evident well it might sound incredibly simple to say all that sort of stuff but it's actually very hard to do in practice because all of us struggle in being free in Christ with the pull that comes to actually seek to be more selfish and to continue to live for ourselves and that's why it's so good tonight that those who have been confirmed have the confirmation that comes from the laying on of hands as a sign of the fact that God through the Holy Spirit has come into their hearts and lives and he's come into their hearts and lives to strengthen and enable them to live in a new way with his particular help and his particular assistance through the Holy Spirit but as well as that we're not doing this as some individual act those people are making that public declaration and commitment in the context here of God's people gathered together and therefore hopefully they'll be encouraged by the fact that the Christian life is lived out in the context of a community of people who are committed to each other who are seeking to serve each other and seeking to assist each other to live out this

Christian journey because it's not a solo slog it's something we do with God's people together and hopefully you'll know the joy of what it is to be supported and assisted and prayed for by others as you seek to express this freedom in Christ well freedom in Christ is a gift from Christ it's something that he blesses with and something he gives us with if we're prepared to turn to him and to seek to live for him but at so the well of that it's something we have to actually keep expressing day by day not actually actually living a life of selfishness but choosing again and again and again to live for Christ and to express and to discover his freedom by living in dependence upon him as we seek to serve God in the community of his people as well as that as we seek to live out our faith day by day may God bless us as we seek to choose freedom in Christ Amen