

Breaking the chains

Acts 16:16-34; John 17:17-26

Jean Jacques Rousseau, the C18th French philosopher, starts his book *Du Contrat Social* with the sentence, “Man is born free but everywhere is in chains.” Writing of the situation in France prior to the Revolution, Rousseau’s words still ring true in the C21st. It could be argued that in our age we have never known so much freedom. It would appear that the freedom of choice that we have is staggering in virtually every area of life. Relative prosperity, the growing power of the individual, the advances in technology that enable communication and freedom from workaday drudgery, advances in medicine and social care, freedom to follow, or not, your religious choices, your political choices and so on.

And yet, whilst we do not live in a totalitarian state like North Korea, or in the areas brutalised by so-called Islamic State, or Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, we are not as free as we think. The chains are subtle, often of our own making, but they are still there. Chains of discrimination and poverty; chains of casual racism and other inequalities in society; chains of ageism and sexism; chains of bigotry; chains of loneliness and poor mental health; chains of frailty; chains of addiction; chains of over-work; chains of peer pressure; chains of apathy; chains of unrealistic expectations; chains of cynicism. “Man is born free but everywhere is in chains”: it is not hard to see today.

“The presence of God’s Spirit is the occasion for freedom, including the liberation of our true selves.”ⁱ God, through the ministry of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has come to set us free. Where God’s Spirit is, there is freedom. In our reading from Acts, the ministry of Paul and Silas is about bringing freedom.

There is freedom for the young girl who has a poor mental health condition, which was exploited by her owners for financial gain; there is freedom for Paul and Silas, unjustly imprisoned; there is freedom for the jailer, who lives in fear of being punished for what he assumed would be his collusion in the miraculous events that led to the chains falling off not only the Christian

missionaries, but all the prisoners in that Philippian jail. There is more than one set of chains being broken. The evidence of God being at work is found in the presence of freedom.

The freedom God offers is not, of course, license to do whatever we want. The message of Jesus brings transformation that turns the chains that hold us back or weigh us down into the social bonds that connect us to service. When we gather here on Sunday many of us are under the pressure of work, or family commitment, as well as less helpful things that weigh down our hearts and minds. As we worship we are given opportunities to clarify our values and our motives, and to see all that we do and all that we are in the light of the gospel message. Here there is a breathing space, which is not escapism. Here we are challenged to recalibrate and re-evaluate who we are and what we do and why we do it. Here in community we are reminded of the needs of those around us, and the opportunities we may have to make a difference for good. Here we are offered God's gift of the freedom to serve others, freeing ourselves from the contemporary obsession with self. When we engage with the gospel, we are freed from the confining assumptions that chain us to ourselves, or our work, or things less than helpful that bind us and limit us and narrow us and burden us.

In Charles Dickens' novel, *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley, visits the miser Ebenezer Scrooge. Marley appears, "captive, bound and double-ironed", with chains which are described as, "long, and wound about him like a tail...made...of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel." Marley describes it as a chain he had forged himself, link by link, out of his greed and selfishness, and his mistreatment of the poor and wretched." It is a chilling image; going to your grave still bound in chains.

With freedom comes responsibility. Last Thursday's elections remind us of that in the world of politics. Whilst some were celebrating a 55% turnout of the electorate, I am left wondering what the other 45% thought was more important than voting, however they would have voted. We also ought to reflect on the freedom of our elected representatives. There will be talk of mandates, but there should also be reminders that those elected to serve are just that: elected

to serve, to represent. In reality there are very rare occasions when mandates are unequivocal and clear. The freedom of political democracy is broadly hedged around with restraints and checks. It is not a once every five years phenomenon, it is something all of our elected MSPs and MPs and others must observe. And each one of us must play our part in that process. Particularly in a Scottish Parliament where there is no over-all majority. It is good to talk. Break the chains; free the people to serve and be served.

Breaking the chains, whatever those chains may be, is essential to the Christian faith. Broken chains are symbols of hope. "There is a ghost that surrounds the world. A lie that has become truth. A lie that has become religion. It has many priest and many followers. It is the ghost of the unchangeable world."ⁱⁱ The good news of Jesus tells us that the world, even our world, can be changed. The chains can be broken, even if we can only manage it a link at a time. The good news of Jesus tells us that in a world that feels weighed down with the chains of burdensome duty, or covert despair, or shape-shifting cynicism, the chains can be broken, and hope can come. The good news of Jesus reminds us that hope soars, as surely as Jesus did in the parable of the Ascension, which prepares us for a world where Jesus may not physically be present, but where He has left behind His footprints on the hearts and souls of believers. It is unquenchable, that hope; it is relentless, that hope; like Emily Dickinson's little poem:

"Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul

And sings the tune without the words

And never stops at all."

Beaten and bruised and wrongly accused, Paul and Silas in their chains prayed and sang hymns. That must have been annoying in the middle of the night! But it kept their spirits up, and at some point, somehow, the chains broke for them and for the others in that jail, and the presence of God's Spirit brought them freedom, which they then shared with others. The chains were broken, just as they were broken at Calvary. "At the height of hopelessness, an act of hope that comes not from us, that has not been developed through human rationality, that

bears to relation to evolution, and that has never been seen before surprises hopeless people.”ⁱⁱⁱ
We have become too accustomed to despair and the chains that come with that. Christ came to break the chains, and to keep on breaking them, so that the hope faith offers does not disappoint and is no fantasy and is the kind of hope upon which we can depend.^{iv} That’s what Paul experience in his Philippian jail, when the chains were broken. The hope of faith. The liberating, chain breaking hope of faith.

It is what Christianity still offers to the world. To you, to me, to everyone. Show me what you hope for, and I will know who you are. Hope is the stuff that gets us through and beyond when the worst that can happen happens.

Your chains, they will be broken. In the hope of the Christ, you are set free. Start singing. Start soaring. Start sharing.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Richard Landers, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2, p523

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, Hope for the World, p126

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid p77

^{iv} Peter J Gomes, The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus, p220