

Reflection for August

Theme: Freedom

Scripture for Reflection: Galatians Ch 5

Abraham Lincoln went to a slave market. There he noted a young, beautiful African-American woman being auctioned off to the highest offer. He bid on her and won. He could see the anger in the young woman's eyes and could imagine what she was thinking, 'another white man will buy me, use me, and then discard me'.

As Lincoln walked off with his 'property', he turned to the woman and said, 'You're free'. 'Yeah. What does that mean?' she replied. 'It means that you're free.' 'Does it mean I can say whatever I want to say?' 'Yes,' replied Lincoln, smiling, 'it means you can say whatever you want to say.' 'Does it mean,' she asked incredulously, 'that I can be whatever I want to be?' 'Yes, you can be whatever you want to be.' 'Does it mean,' the young woman said hesitantly, 'that I can go wherever I want to go?' 'Yes, it means you are free and you can go wherever you want to go.'

'Then,' said the woman with tears welling up in her eyes, 'I think I'll go with you.'

Steve Brown, *A Scandalous Freedom*

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

Freedom is such a paradox when you think of it. Our freedom fighters lost their lives so that we may gain freedom. However, despite our freedom, we still haven't lost our chains. The issues that plagued us then, plagues us now. We are still ruled, only the colour of the skin and the names of the rulers have changed. And while we mull over the hapless state of affairs in the affairs of the State, why don't we take a closer look at our Christian life and the chains that plague us too. After all, Jesus died to set us free. Yet, we wonder what exactly does this freedom mean when we are constantly bound by dos and don'ts. More so, what exactly does this freedom look like when we are still sinners?

"do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Freedom is a paradox for another reason too. It can never be had by holding on to it. Freedom, like love, joy and like all good things, must be given away to be experienced. Ultimately, giving away freedom is what makes us free. Now what does that mean?

Perhaps it is best explained by the conversion story of one of the greatest writers in Christendom. In his autobiographical piece entitled *Surprised by Joy*, C S Lewis explains how for years he was blocked from committing himself to faith for various reasons, not the least of them being his opinion that a commitment to faith was somehow selling short one's freedom. In all his hesitations, he was challenged by J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *Lord of the Rings*, a friend and a practicing Roman Catholic. Lewis recalls the number of evenings when Tolkien and he would have dinner together and then walk the streets of Oxford for hours, arguing about faith and religion. On one such evening, shortly before his conversion, Tolkien

challenged him: "Your inability to picture for yourself the mysteries of Jesus' life is a failure of imagination on your part!" While Lewis was stung by that remark, he also realized its truth.

Not long afterwards, on one uneventful night he finally, first, knelt down to acknowledge his faith. He admitted he did so not in a burst of joy and enthusiasm, but "as the most reluctant convert in the history of Christendom." Parts of him were still in rebellion, but he knew he *needed to kneel* as an act of humility and acceptance he had come to know that "the harshness of God is kinder than the softness of man and God's compulsion is our liberation."

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to assume that for a man struggling with the idea of having to give away his freedom, the only way he could be really be free was to be on his knees. The paradox again is inevitable. Kneeling has always been a sign of subjugation in slave history. And yet, Lewis somehow intuitively knew he needed to subjugate himself (to God, not man) to be free.

This idea of freedom being given away is best understood by the image of Jesus before Pilate. To an onlooker, Jesus is unfree in every sense. From every outward appearance, Jesus is unfree. He stands before Pilate shackled and seemingly helpless. Yet, Jesus is freer than anyone we can imagine at that moment. Pilate believes he is the one in control when he says, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. (ref Jn 19:10-11). He had in the garden of Gethsemane already given over his freedom to the Father's will, infact much earlier in John 10 when Jesus stated he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, he went on to say "No one takes it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (v 18)

This is the freedom that Christ exemplifies and even expects from his disciples. We give away the reigns of our life (of our own free will) thus laying it down in service, in humility, in acceptance to the Greater Will of the Father and in that giving away of our freedom, like Jesus we are truly free. Only in learning from Jesus can we ever learn to give away our freedom for only he said, "...my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Mt 11:28).

"You, my brothers/ sisters, were called to be free."

But that begs the question- what does this freedom mean?

Imagine a gardener planting a sapling in his little garden. As much as he cares for it, he knows the animals around will not let it survive for long and so he builds a fence around it. The fence is strong enough to keep away the prying eyes and the relentless hands of the animals. But after a while when the plant grows up, it begins to find the fence constricting. It wonders why the gardener kept it there in the first place. And so the plant tugs at the fence, then pushes and pushes till it cannot push anymore... It gives up helplessly. But as the years pass, its stem grows bigger and stronger. Soon the plant is a tree and the stem a strong bark. The fence is now broken: its purpose of protecting the plant and making it strong have both been met. To put in other words, the fence had to 'go' at a particular time else it would have stopped the tree to grow to its maturity.

Freedom looks something like this. We grow up with rules. We may not like the rules but they keep us safe and they help us mature. And in keeping the law faithfully, there comes a time when we don't need the law anymore. We do the right thing because of a grace we receive. And we may even break some of those rules for a greater good, but the breaking of the rule is not out of a rebellion, or anger or simply to prove a point but out of grace. The law is now "inscribed on [our] hearts" (Jer 31:33). This is the only way to break the rules- by having kept them scrupulously and with reverence, that there comes a time when we 'break' it, it is only to serve the higher purposes of love.

"But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature"

A few years ago, Vogue did a short film titled My Choice. Featuring 99 women with actress Deepika Padukone in the lead, the film tried to "empower" women to basically cheat in marriages, abort their babies, be irresponsible in relationships all in the garb of "my choice". Thankfully the common women and men saw through their entitled garb and called out their fake feminism.

In America, there are men who identify as women or trans-females participating in women's sports and winning all the titles because of their "freedom" to be what they choose to be. Then there are people who identify as animals, walk on fours, purr or bark like animals, all in the name of freedom.

While we listen to these aghast stories of misdirected notions of freedom, it may help to look closer home, at our vocations and in our communities where we live out the vow of obedience. Let us reflect and clarify to ourselves what it means to be a Religious sister in today's world? Does it take away our freedom or give us freedom? What is our understanding of freedom and the place of the vow of Obedience in our lives?

For us human beings, exercising our power in doing our own will gives us a sense of our own worth. We like to be directed by our own wisdom, our own way of looking at things. Christ teaches us a higher wisdom: that of renouncing our will in order that the very Wisdom of God may direct us through our seeming powerlessness. In fact, to obey like Christ demands from us the exercise of a power which can come only from God. That is why it is the Holy Spirit who transforms us from within in the gift of the vow of Obedience, urging us to surrender in faith to the Father's will, however unreasonable it may seem on the natural level. It is this obedience that makes us truly children of God in union with Christ, and through Him contributes to the salvation of the world. Obedience also frees us for service in the Church in the spirit of Christ our Redeemer.

Our own foundress Mother Veronica by nature an independent and a self-willed person is an outstanding example of heroic obedience. Throughout her life, we see her eagerness to discover God's will for her, and a readiness to carry it out, cost what it may. Her conversion to Catholicism, her breaking off her betrothal to a Marine officer, her entry religious life, her departure for the missions, her leaving the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition for the Carmel, her very founding of the Apostolic Carmel, and all the various events of her "strange Destiny" cost her much suffering and seemingly even frustration in her work. Yet, she could sum up her life and say, 'Obedience is my life.' Bishop Marie Ephrem confirms this in his letter to her and pays a great tribute to her: "I see with true satisfaction that you are always guided

by holy obedience... it will always be a great gain to you and the work, that you are able to say to yourself, 'I have obeyed.' (Letters 11, July 1868). Her example is a rich source of inspiration to us her children.

“live by the Spirit”, “led by the Spirit” and “the fruit of the Spirit”

St. Paul begins his letter to the Galatians saying that for freedom Christ has set us free and it requires resistance against a return to slavery. We do it with the power of the Holy Spirit given to us. When we are open to the guidance of the Spirit and are led by him, we produce the fruits of the Spirit in our life and service i.e., love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Let us ask ourselves a few questions to see where we are in this regard and pray over them:

As we follow the rules of the community, are we becoming more loving? Do we forgive easily, not making a spectacle of the one who is wrong or being boastful about our righteousness? Are we more joyful? When people enter into our homes are they met with well-rehearsed smiles and pleasantries or with genuine joy?

Are we more at peace; the first to make peace? Do we wait for time or the other party to make peace? Have we made peace with our past, our hurts, our unfulfilled dreams? , Do we treat with patience those who are slow to learn a language or pick up a skill or even slow to change their actions?

Do we treat each other with kindness and goodness?

Are we faithful in endurance even when prayer seems dull or the dark night of the soul unending?

Are we gentle while nursing the sick and elderly in our communities?

And while we may have mastered self-control over food and temper, have we controlled the need to judge each other ever so quietly in our minds?

When you think of your life in the community, what does freedom look like to you?

Which among the fruits of the Spirit would you like to grow in?

True freedom lies in living by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit with the fruit of the Spirit. In fact, St Paul dares to say “against such things there is no law!”
