

John 8:31-47
“Freedom!!”

A long time back, I remember a comment being made about my style of preaching. Not so much the Bible content, but the illustrations. I have a suspicion that the person who made the comment was rather more used to sermons being filled with quotations from famous theologians over the years, but the problem seems to have been that ***You must watch a lot of television!***

Well, maybe that's true. But the problem, if it is one, is more that I *remember* a lot of television. So here's one thing I remember from this week, a rather fascinating analysis of films over the years by **Marc Kermode**. He's done a string of things like this, pointing out how certain genres of films typically work. So he has compared **westerns** down through the years, and **horror** films, and **rom-coms**, all sorts of things.

This week, though, he was doing British **historical** dramas. The word “historical”, in that context, needs to be used with caution, because, as I'm sure you know, historical accuracy is not what these things are primarily about. It's much more about whether you can tell a good story that people will pay to read or come and see.

And that's nothing new. **Shakespeare** did it, moving historical characters a decade or two to make for a better storyline, or developing and exaggerating facts and legends far from whatever roots they had in fact.

And one thing that Marc Kermode was particularly harsh on, in his sly ironic way, was the 1995 film **Braveheart**, the largely imagined account of William Wallace, the late 13th-century warrior who led the Scots in their war of independence from England and King Edward I.

We were treated to a snippet of Wallace, played by **Mel Gibson**, rallying the troops, with a suspiciously Australian version of a Scottish accent. And then - now here I can't say with any certainty, because this is a film I *haven't* seen - I presume Wallace is eventually captured and, before the inevitable public execution, manages to once more shout **Freedom!!** before the axe swings and severs head from body.

Historical or not, the film managed 10 **Oscar** nominations, and carried off five of the actual trophies. **Freedom** is an emotive cry, down through the centuries.

Go to the far future, and there was an early **Star Trek** episode featuring Kirk and the usual gang captured on the distant world of Omega 4, ruled by suspiciously oriental-human-looking aliens. Imprisoned alongside them is an enormous brute of a man - funny how so many of the aliens look like human beings dressed up, wasn't it! - glowering in a corner, apparently lost in his or its own thoughts. And you wouldn't want to intrude, because this guy looked as if he could just break you in half with his bare hands, if he had a mind to.

And then it looks as if our heroes are in trouble, as they discuss how to escape and gain their freedom. The hulk of muscle in the corner stirs ... and

speaks.

Freedom? That is a Worship Word... You will not speak it!

And it turns out that this giant that we're supposed to think might almost be an ape is actually at least as civilised as this other tribe that had captured him. He comes from a culture that had developed in parallel with Earth's white Americans, until the dastardly Communists - the other tribe - took over the world. But, of course, as for all good Americans ... think, maybe, **Independence Day**, when saving the planet can be safely left to the so-called "leader of the Free World" ... freedom is a "worship word". And that spirit will not die, no matter how oppressed.

Not that it's just limited to the good old US of A, I would say. Don't you see something of the same spirit as that funny group of old duffers march around on exercises around **Wilmington-on-Sea**? Old and/or decrepit they might largely be, but they will fight to maintain their freedom!

Freedom has been on our minds a lot in the last few months, too. Some people have chosen to view the Lockdowns in response to **CoronaVirus** as a personal freedom issue. I noticed on Friday that there was a candidate in the **Hartlepool by-election** standing for "Freedom Party No Lockdown".

It certainly does feel as if we have been deprived of freedoms that we've all become totally accustomed to in this country. I wouldn't think that there are many people who won't be looking forward to those hopefully final reversals of those restrictions on the 17th May and the 21st June.

There's a wonderful image of celebrating that joy of release in the Scriptures. Have you ever noticed it in that final little book of the OT? There is a day of judgement coming, but ...

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

(Malachi 4:2)

Maybe that would have been in the context of being kept penned up over winter, or maybe just overnight. That restriction on their liberty had been for their own good ... but it is so good to be **free again!**

And freedom is one of the big themes of the Bible. If you've been with us the last few weeks, as we've been going through the book of Exodus, you'll hopefully remember the big liberation event of the OT. God intervenes to bring his people out from slavery in Egypt. And there is celebration! The army that Pharaoh sent out to re-capture them was defeated so emphatically that they now know they have finally and fully escaped.

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; ..."

(Exodus 15:1-2)

And the echoes of that sound all the way down through their history. Even those famous **Ten Commandments** start with a reminder of it:

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. ..."

(Exodus 20:1-3)

The ministry of Jesus starts off by striking that **Freedom!!** note, too.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

(Luke 4:18-19)

And yet it is sad and strange that some of the most religious people of Jesus' day most totally misunderstood freedom. Freedom for those Pharisees was a word, rather than an experience. And woe to anyone who challenged their understanding of their freedom. Or, perhaps, offered freedom to people *they* didn't think worthy of it.

That's what we see in that passage we read together earlier on. Jesus has been making some outlandish claims for himself:

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

(John 6:35)

And this is aggravated by a clear usage of that special Name of God, which the Pharisees would have insisted never be spoken - for fear of transgressing that commandment about taking that name lightly, "in vain". For the Pharisees, that extra emphatic "**I am**" was a blasphemous thing to say.

And Jesus insisted that he would not be bound by their insistence on petty rules concerning the Sabbath. He *healed* people on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees condemned it as "work". In answering them, Jesus commits another horror:

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

(John 5:18)

So the situation has already become tense, when we get to John chapter 8. Then Jesus dares to make another statement, another claim about what he is and what he can do.

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
(John 8:12)

The Pharisees don't like *that*, either, and argue back against him. But some of the people hearing that public dispute are won over.

As he was saying these things, many believed in him.
(John 8:30)

That's where we enter the account that we read earlier. Jesus speaking to these new followers:

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."
(John 8:31-32)

Please don't put too religious and churchy a spin on that word "abide"; it simply means to remain or to keep. It's not a question of a once-off commitment, but a life of discipleship following Jesus. To anyone who does that, there is that wonderful offer of freedom.

Now if we hadn't read that passage earlier, what would you have expected? Isn't that just such a great promise? **Freedom!!** But John records that his hearers took it as an *insult* instead.

They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"
(John 8:33)

Goodness, those guys would have been happy enough waving flags on the 1st-century equivalent of the **Last Night of the Proms**. *Hebrews, never, never, never Shall be slaves!* Of course not! They could trace their lineage all the way back to great Father Abraham. Of course they were the children of promise! How *dare* anyone suggest anything other than that they are already totally free! Jesus, how can you use that word "**become**"? How dare you slight Abraham ... and *us*?

Folks, in this country, do we feel something of that because of our history? Remember how the **globe** used to have so much pink on it? We civilised the world, didn't we? ... with perhaps a bit of help from the French and the Portuguese and the Spanish and the Dutch. We sent out missionaries by the hundred to the darkness of Africa, and won much of it for Christ, didn't we?

We have the **Mother of parliaments**, and that original sort of Bill of Rights we call the **Magna Carta**, don't we?

People come to our **universities** from around the world, don't they? And people around the world know that to get on in this 21st century, they need to learn our language.

So who would dare - especially after **Brexit** - to suggest that true Brits need to be set free? Who here has got shackles on their wrists or ankles? And yet ...

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

(John 8:34)

And yet there is a spiritual dimension to all of this, too. Enslavement is not just physical or even mental. It is something that a country's or a family's background has not the slightest effect on.

And there is a warning associated with this. Using the analogies in the society of his day, Jesus says that only *family* persists. Slaves don't belong. But, as the Son of the family *par excellence*, Jesus' invitation to glorious freedom stands.

"The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

(John 8:35-36)

So there is a contradiction. People can seem outwardly to be qualified. But the qualification is something internal. And the outward actions will betray what the status of that "something internal" is. Yes, technically, genealogically, you are Abraham's children ... but you're nothing like your so-called "father"!

"I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you."

(John 8:37)

So the legitimate suspicion arises ... or, should I say, a suspicion relating to legitimacy. Whose children, spiritually speaking, are these people?

"I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

(John 8:38)

You can tell they pick up on what Jesus says there with some subtlety. They insist on their proper parentage:

They answered him, "Abraham is our father."

(John 8:39)

But there is a frightful inconsistency here, that Jesus will not let them just wriggle around. There's a conclusion that needs to be drawn.

Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did."

(John 8:39-41)

No, there is clearly a different heritage here. You are no chip of *that* old block. But his hearers really don't like Jesus' insistence on the point ... so they resort to insult, based on thirty-year old scandal.

They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father — even God."

(John 8:41)

Think back to your Christmas story. There's the tidy version, an angel and the Holy Spirit and Mary ... but, I think the implication here is, we all know that *Jesus, you have still not outrun that stigma of illegitimacy*. That big question mark, just to put it politely, still hangs over you. Whereas we, his incensed hearers argue, are squeaky clean.

But claiming that "God is your father" doesn't automatically make it so. And notice here how Jesus is not thrown by that veiled insult. Actually, treating someone as different because they are illegitimate never was fair - but that is the way society worked. It has more or less disappeared from our thinking nowadays, with the change in how many people view marriage.

But in the society in which this dialogue we're looking at takes place, it is a vicious verbal blow - and below the belt. And yet Jesus does not let this intended insult deflect him from - calm, overwhelming logical argument.

And folks, let's bear this in mind as the society around *us* may start making scurrilous accusations about the followers of Jesus. In the early centuries, the rumour did the rounds that Christians were cannibals, because they ate human flesh and drank human blood in their secret religious rites.

Nowadays we're being presented as narrow-minded, homophobic, transphobic bigots, ready to torture anyone who questions their non-straightness with "conversion therapy". And we cannot retaliate in like manner.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.

(Romans 12:17)

Instead, we're called to respond as Jesus did:

... by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise.

(2 Corinthians 6:7-8)

And so Jesus presses his winning point home, gently but firmly.

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me."

(John 8:42)

But now he goes onto something of the offensive. In both senses of the word,

too: the people listening will surely find what he has to say offensive! First, a question - which we'll need to return to later.

“Why do you not understand what I say?”

(John 8:43)

The answer isn't intellectual, but *moral*.

“It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.”

(John 8:43)

And why would that be?

“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

(John 8:44)

But it's even worse than even that might make us think.

“But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”

(John 8:45)

You'd maybe expect the words “even though”, there, but no. Jesus' words are rejected not, surprisingly, *even though* they are true; they are rejected *because* they are true. *Because* the truth is painful and unpalatable and unacceptable.

Where do we see that nowadays? In some of the prominent radical atheists, I think, people like Richard Dawkins, who will just flat outright reject the possibility of the existence of God, and label a moron anyone who even wants to consider that idea. It so flies in the face of all innate sense

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

(Romans 1:19-20)

Who's the “they”? It's people ...

... who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

(Romans 1:18)

Just as these people are trying to do with Jesus. He speaks a truth they cannot really deny, but do not want to hear. *Because* it is true, *because* it cannot be reasonably denied, it has to be suppressed, ignored. They have to **stuff their fingers in their ears** to keep from hearing these horrible facts. But Jesus' unanswered questions continue to stack up:

“Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?”

(John 8:46)

Awful, unavoidable conclusion:

“Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

(John 8:47)

Folks, it is not polite to say that. But it is necessary. I'm sure there are still some of the older generation left in this country who would think it a mortal insult if you were to tell them they're not a Christian - irrespective of what they actually believe about Jesus Christ. Even if they have in practice lived without reference to him for decades, they would be highly offended if it were even suggested that “you are not of God”.

But folks, come back to our title to finish now. Think ***Freedom!!***

Imagine someone who has been locked in a deep, dark **dungeon** for as long as they can remember. It's not totally dark. Their eyes have grown used to the dim light. They have become accustomed to the loneliness of their own thoughts. They have become adept at avoiding thinking about why it was that they were placed in this place of confinement. If ever they do, the incident is trivialised - the crime was not so serious. Or rationalised - they had it coming. Or denied - false accusations had been made.

And now this someone - a prisoner, we realise - is offered the key to his cell. He is offered a **pardon**. But ... a *pardon* implies an offence. And *no* offence, they have insisted to themselves for year after lonely year, was ever committed. So ... no, a pardon is an insult! Rather than accept that insult, they will remain in the dark.

Folks, let me put the words of Jesus on the screen again.

“Why do you not understand what I say?”

(John 8:43)

“If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?”

(John 8:46)

Could it be that Jesus' diagnosis is just band on the nose:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”

(John 8:34)

Could it be that you're not as free as you would really like to think you are? ... and that you really need to realise that this promise is for *you*:

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

(John 8:31-32)

