

Freedom in the Obedience of Faith

Romans 6.19-23

At the start of chapter six, at whose nineteenth verse we find ourselves in today's epistle, St Paul has ended the first part of what Bishop Charles Gore in his commentary on Romans, called 'the moral-counterpart'. Bishop Gore meant by that how St Paul describes the outworking in Christians' life and experience of being in right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. In chapter five St Paul has already presented the human predicament in terms of some potent contraries: the old man (Adam) and the new (Jesus), condemnation and acceptance (or justification), law and grace, death and resurrection.

In today's 'part two' of that discussion, Paul adds yet another set of contraries to the mix: slavery and freedom. So, I've titled today's brief sermon 'freedom in the obedience of faith'. You may recognize the phrase 'the obedience of faith' from the opening of Paul's letter where his apostleship aims to bring about 'the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles', including those in Rome to whom he writes (1.5-6). In fact, he returns to the theme within the rest of this long letter.¹

By chapter six his explanations about grace, faith and justification (or being made right with God) are well under way. He has, as I've said, already begun a discussion which burrows into the conflicting realities of living before God in the spiritual 'space' opened for us 'in Christ'.

¹ Note, especially, how he ends: '...to bring about the obedience of faith' (16.26).

For, let's face it, however complete the victory won by Christ for us, however truly Christ Jesus has cleft the rock² and rendered us acceptable to God through his merits alone, we still live on a field of battle where intense skirmishes and rear-guard assaults abound. The slippage back into bondage, both its pains and its pleasures (!), always confronts us.

That's why St Paul can use the terminology of the free person and the slave as a meaningful, real-time description of the spiritual lot of believers. Doubtless it resonated within the socially mixed constituency of Rome's first Christian fellowship, 'all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints' (1.7).

It's important to see that beneath St Paul's argument in today's reading lies an understanding of human freedom, itself rooted in a view about the fundamental posture of the human being. And that's the focus of what Bishop Gore wants to say about this portion of chapter six.

As to our freedom, it's not, needless to say, an *absolute* freedom. But where we can exercise choices as free agents - the sort we do day-in and day-out as a matter of course - we draw on resources which either serve our best ends or lead away from those best ends. The moral life to which we aspire is a life in which we inform our power of choice and then act in the direction of what is closest to the Good, to the One who alone is 'Good', namely God (Mk 10.18). 'Be ye perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect', Jesus urges us (Matt. 5.48).

² A reference to one of today's hymns, 'Rock of ages, cleft for me' by A. M. Toplady, apparently Dr. Pusey's favourite him.

Paul, for his part, speaks of 'the upward call' toward 'the full stature of Christ' (Eph.4.13), of 'Christ within you, the hope of glory' (Col. 1.27). Later in this letter we'll read again one of his most famous exhortations: 'I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...' (12.1-2). Paul's point is that when we draw on the resources of grace, let's call them *gracious energies*, in all their varied forms so as to act according to God's good purposes for us, then, in fact, we experience *freedom*. We experience a foretaste of the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' (8.21) - St Paul's words from chapter eight which many of us know well.

But when we neglect those gracious energies whose source is outside ourselves, and instead draw on the tainted, wayward energies within, which we Christians call 'passions', then we turn from our natural and supernatural destiny and become slaves. The internal energies which, by means of grace, we're meant to master for good *in fact master us*.

The battles of our moral and spiritual lives (for the two are bound-up together) are fought on just that battle field.

So, St Paul is describing a situation, a posture, in which we all find ourselves, don't we? - I mean, living amid the push-and-pull of two opposing energies, the grace-bearing ones which give us a 'taste of liberty',³ on the one hand, the passionate energies which effect spiritual and moral bondage, on the other.

Here are Bishop Gore's own words as he seeks to interpret our human and Christian situation in terms of slavery and freedom. Though he writes as a thorough-going Edwardian, he speaks of both women and men, of male and female, of us *all*:

³ The phrase is A. M. Allchin's.

Man, then, is so constructed that *he can only cease to fall below himself by being raised above himself*. His life cannot fail to be stamped with the impress of sin unless he is stamped with the impress of God. The state of the Christian, surrendered to the fashioning of God, is that true dependence which is the true liberty... Surrendered to God in faith...he receives into his nature, through all its open portals, the in-flooding tide of divine love; and enters, enriched and uplifted, into the life that is eternal life, the life which he shares with Jesus, the life that is truly human and really divine.⁴

Let's put it in a nut-shell: the freedom for which we are made comes by our total surrender to God's will for us, so far as each of us can discern that in his or her unique situation. The cost of our freedom is our surrender by the might of the Holy Advocate within.

That's the freedom of obedience to which each and all of us, baptized into Christ, have been called.

Amen.

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⁴ Charles Gore, *St Paul's Epistle to the Romans. A Practical Exposition*, vol. 1, pp. 232-3. Italics mine.