

Day 165

Ezra 4-6, Psalm 134, 1 Corinthians 9

Freedom and liberty are hall-marks of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as Paul stresses to those to whom he writes: freedom from having life ordered by rules and regulations that we are incapable of keeping, and freedom from the consequences of such failures, and freedom from the wider power and consequences of sin and death.

But today Paul also reminds us that liberty does not mean license to behave in whatever ways we feel like. In the last chapter Paul has promised to give up meat, to avoid upsetting people through eating what was sacrificed to idols. Now he reminds the Corinthians how he also supported himself while he was with them, giving up any expectation that they should support him and Barnabas (let alone wives, with whom other apostles travelled). Yet he expresses frustration that by curtailing his freedom, his rights, they have devalued him and his teaching, and taken it all for granted.

But nonetheless, he will keep on doing all this to promote preaching the gospel, which he feels impelled by God to do. He is prepared to be 'all things to all people' so that his hearers may more readily grasp the good news of Jesus Christ. And, like a runner in a race, he will not give up doing the right thing – and nor, he says, should we. All of us should have such dedication.

Our Old Testament chapters recount similar dedication to doing the right thing among the exiles returning to Jerusalem to restore life and worship in Jerusalem, first in the reigns of Persian emperors Cyrus and Darius, and later under Artaxerxes. They do not resort to the bullying and bribing exercised against their efforts to rebuild the temple, but trust in the Persian authorities to see justice is done.

And once again they were able to worship in the Temple, conscious of being in the presence of the Lord, 'lifting up their hands in the sanctuary', as today's Psalm says.

QUESTIONS

Are there areas in your life where you might choose not to exercise your freedom as a Christian, so as to help others find, and grow in, the faith? And, in contrast, are there areas where you take for granted, or exploit, such commitment in others?

Consider how Christians can work with the political systems of your own society, in order to pursue freedom of religion, and uphold justice.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you gave up the glories of heaven to save us. Help me to not to 'demand my rights' but to strive for the prize that comes through sharing your good news. Amen.

Day 166

Ezra 7-9, Psalm 135, I Corinthians 10

Today Paul has more to say about not confusing liberty with license. To say that 'everything is permissible' is very different from saying that 'everything is helpful'. When facing choices, we need to give far more weight to asking 'what helps others?'

The reason for this is that we are not actually independent individuals with no responsibility beyond ourselves and our own desires for self-fulfillment. As Christians, we are reminded of this whenever we share the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion, Eucharist, or Mass), and hear Paul's words again: 'We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.' In Christ, our lives are intimately connected with those of other Christians, and our choices must reflect this. We must think again, if we are looking at actions that will harm their faith.

We must also be aware how our words and actions affect those outside the Church, and should avoid 'causing them to stumble'. This does not mean that others exercise a veto over our lives, but it does call us to live with sensitivity. When wondering what others will make of us, we need to ask whether what we do and say will be understood as 'all for the glory of God'.

In our Old Testament chapters, we read how Ezra came to Jerusalem, several decades after the first wave of returning exiles. His priority is to restore faithful worship, mirrored in faithful lives. He is appalled by the unfaithfulness he finds, which he sees reflected in the many marriages to neighboring women of other religions. He demands these men separate from their wives (who, according to Persian practices, would have retained custody of the children). To us, this seems very harsh – and indeed, Paul tells Christians to stay with unbelieving spouses who do not oppose our faith (1 Cor 7:14-15). But the underlying principle remains to challenge us: is there coherence in our faith, reflecting Jesus and glorifying God and giving praise to him (as in our Psalm), for all to see, across the whole of our lives?

QUESTIONS

'God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear ... but will provide a way out.' How can these words be a helpful part of your decision-making when faced with choices over what is 'permissible' but perhaps not 'helpful'?

What sort of 'giving up' or 'putting aside' by your Christian community might help communicate the good news of Jesus Christ more effectively to society around? What church practices are not seen by outsiders as being 'for the glory of God'?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help me to be someone who doesn't just talk the talk, but walks the walk – following you – both within the church, and for the whole world to see. Amen.

Day 167

Ezra 10, Psalm 136, I Corinthians 11

For centuries Corinth had been a major commercial center: multicultural, cosmopolitan and with a reputation for loose moral living. The gospel of Jesus Christ comes to all cultures with a message of both judgment and hope, and, as with so many places today, the difficult question is discerning which applies where.

For most of us today, it goes without saying that God can and does use women in Christian leadership alongside men, gifting individuals by the Spirit for particular tasks that do not reflect one gender or another. Given that in Scripture, the position accorded women is repeatedly one of far more equality and justice than in contemporary society (for example, from Deborah [Judges 4] to the Gospels), it would be surprising if the Church were to lag two millennia behind secular practice.

But the key objective for Paul in this chapter is to ensure holy, reverent worship, and especially when Christians gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper (which here may have been combined with a 'bring-and-share' meal). Therefore self-promotion by any group, or cliques, or showing off wealth, or hierarchies that belittle the poorer and less influential, or anything else that undercuts the message of Jesus' self-giving sacrifice for all alike, is a disgrace. It has no place within Christian living. Yet in a world which elevates to celebrity status the rich and powerful, this is very counter-cultural. But the key, says Paul, is for us to emulate him and the best of Christian leaders and their teaching, just as they follow the example of Jesus Christ.

And so, when I read with sadness the final chapter of the Book of Ezra, I wonder how many of the unrecorded wives and children, went away knowing that the refrain of Psalm 136 'God's love endures for ever', held true for them personally. I recall how another foreign wife, Ruth, was grandmother of King David, recorded in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). And I also recall Paul's words from another letter, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28).

QUESTIONS

'Maintain the traditions' says Paul. How can we uphold the heart of traditions, while appropriately making them live in our own societies and contexts?

Where do you find the greatest challenges of living 'counter-culturally'? In what ways does receiving the Lord's Supper help you to reflect the example of Jesus?

PRAYER

Lord, open my eyes so I may see where the 'norms' of life which I take for granted, run counter to your gospel, and help me live by your standards, not those of my culture. Amen.