



St Marylebone
Parish Church

6pm 3rd February

Choral Evening Prayer with Prayers for Healing

When I was a child to be free meant no school, pyjamas, a dance class and a great story.

As an adult it is a complex thing to define. In our society freedom is portrayed in our media as glorious holidays in sun-kissed places, with beautiful people, golden sands and a turquoise sea;

as a beautiful woman being able to wear white jeans and ride bikes, as sky diving from 1000 feet;

as being able to afford the fanciest homes, clothes, cars and stuff.

I am minded of the Queen song, I want to break free with its ground breaking video portraying and challenging gender stereotypes, with men dress as sexualised women trapped by domesticity.

Socially freedom is social mobility, job opportunity, gender equality and the ability to own our particular identity, gender and sexuality.

Politically we in the West conceptualise freedom as democracy, equality and freedom of speech.

In our reading this evening Jesus sets a sick woman free, the woman marginalised for her gender, and her infirmity is brought centre stage and enabled to stand tall. The reading says she is released from

the bondage of illness, and the grasp of Satan. I must admit when I first read the reading I thought, oh no it's all hellfire and damnation, cutting down trees talking about Satan, death and repentance. I was delighted to find that in the exegesis (the scholarly exploration of the text and its translation) this is not primarily what the passages are about. Instead Jesus saying that people who died in the falling of a tower, or are killed by Pilot were not being judged for their sins. No, he says they are no different from you or I. He is telling us we are all flawed, we share a common humanity and life is short and uncertain, and therefore repent-turn from darkness to the light. Who knows what will happen tomorrow, Carpe diem, seize the day; turn; the light is here.

And then there is the barren tree, unlike other stories of the time Jesus doesn't get rid of the tree with a swift swing of the axe. The gardener (probably Jesus) pleaded with the owner for more time, he cared for the tree, nurtured it and gave it a chance for life. The tree is given help to change, and you've guessed it, we are that tree. We are the ones Jesus is feeding, he is creating the conditions for us to change, to turn to the light and bear fruit. Life is short, but whilst we have breath it's never too late to turn to the light, to repent.

In our text today Jesus heals a woman in the context of the equality of humanity, and time for amendment of ways. She is freed from Satan. In our day and age any mention of Satan, that is not comedic, makes us squirm, but Satan is about bondage and darkness and in our world we see plenty of that. The darkness of depression, the entrapment of young women and men groomed, or trafficked, the ravages of war often fought for dubious ends. Our young people are imprisoned by social media and its messages, enslaved to conform to certain stereotypes. They are exposed to, and enabled to follow, self-harm and suicide post that can lead them to their deaths. Whatever you think about Satan, the darkness and bondage that exists in our time, is ever present.

And Jesus takes a person marginalised by their gender and their infirmity, someone who doesn't look beautiful, or have wealth, or status, and puts her centre stage. He frees her. He challenges the status quo arguing for the dignity of all, shaming the authorities that would value the nurturing of an ox above that of a woman. Who would have the Sabbath; originally instituted to provide freedom from toil, as a vehicle to enslave a child of Abraham. He heals her to stand tall, to take her place as person of value in the eyes of God.

It took courage for the woman to step forward towards Christ, and even more to stand tall and move from the shadows. Too often we just substitute one kind of bondage for another. People free themselves from the claws of poverty, only to be bound by the need to keep up with the Jones', or the Kardashian's. Our broken past can be hard to leave behind, it is what we know and it's scary to feel naked as we try something new, as we stand tall and move to centre stage.

Freedom is God's gift that we must learn to live within. To learn to live as free humans in the light of Christ is a process. For some this process will have dramatic moments like the healed woman in today's reading; for others it's a slow and steady growth towards the light.

So take heart! The ground is prepared for you and all people, the space is created for you and for all. Christ calls you into his light and his freedom, where healing can be found. Be brave. Take a small step, or a giant leap, Christ will catch you, help you to stand, and you never know you might find yourself dancing!