

Lord Jesus, thank you for sharing and guiding, leading and serving. Help us to ponder what it means to follow you, the servant King. Amen.

- What is freedom? How would you define it? The chance to choose? Not having anyone telling you what to do? A lack of burdens and responsibility?
- Of course, many of us will have responsibilities. People we prioritise. People we love. A job to do. A house to keep under control. To what extent are these handcuffs which tie us down or wings that enable us to fly? Is it possible to have a large number of commitments and still be free?
- I was brought face to face with this problem when I was writing the sermon for tonight and without wishing to give the climax of the story away I can give you a spoiler and announce that I think the readings are leading us to discover that true freedom is serving the servant King.
- If you want to experience freedom, then serve the servant King.
- On the face of it we have completely contradictory readings.
- The first reading was the preparations for the first Passover from Exodus. The Jews were slaves serving Pharaoh, the Egyptian King, who treated them harshly and kept them in subjugation. God freed them from slavery and set them off for a life of freedom. He did this in an extreme and violent way, using a mixture of surprise and horror as the angel of death 'passed over' the houses of the Israelites and killed the eldest son in each and every Egyptian household and all the eldest male offspring of the Egyptian animals as well for good measure.
- In this reading it is the power of God that comes through as his defining characteristic. He clearly loves the Jews, but is not so keen on the Egyptian overlords
- This really is not for the fainthearted. There's an awful lot of judgement in this salvation and until the last year I thought it left more questions than it answered, but now I'm beginning to wonder if the only way that God is going to save his creation is by doing something similar again. Like Pharaoh, we are refusing to listen when he gives us the warning signs of the earlier plagues.
- To recap: In Exodus, God is bringing the Jews salvation; freedom from slavery using power and judgement.
- However, then we move to the Gospel reading from John. It is the night before the Passover and Jesus is sharing the Last Supper with his disciples.
- Jesus wins his disciples salvation by dying on the cross. We are made free in Christ. '*For freedom Christ has set us free*', as Paul writes in Galatians. But what does he do in John? In the middle of the meal, he gets up, strips off, and washes his disciples' feet, like a menial slave.
- Peter prevaricates and Jesus tells him sharply that it isn't an option to refuse if he wants to be his disciple. It's symbolic of the washing that he provided on the cross, winning him freedom, washing his sins away. The servant King at his least powerful.
- He then commands his followers to do the same. '*For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master*'. But note that the word he uses for servant is better translated 'slave'. Jesus is calling us back to slavery.
- To recap: In John, Jesus is bringing us salvation. Freedom is taking us back to slavery using sanitizing and vulnerability. It seems to be entirely the opposite to what is happening in Exodus
- In Exodus, God is rescuing the Jews from a harsh king
- In John, Jesus is calling us to follow a new King
- A large proportion of the population of Britain thinks that freedom is actually something else entirely. Freedom is having no king at all. Freedom is being in charge of your own life. Being able to do what you want when you want to, with no responsibility to anybody else. The problem is that at least 50% of the time, what we want is selfish and self-indulgent. We want to drive rather than walk; we want things today rather than having to wait; we enjoy the freedom to eat fresh pineapple at all times of the year regardless of the climate cost of bringing it

here. We don't want to have to care for elderly relatives. The state should do that. But we don't want to pay more in taxes either. We chafe against the bit when we are stymied whether that is through lacks of funds, or lack of availability or through death. It seems so unfair!

- We need a King to lead us through the maze of life even if we think we can manage just fine on our own.
- And that's why, I have come to the conclusion that true freedom is serving the servant King!
- Finding freedom is to do with changing your master and choosing Jesus; serving the servant King
- In the reading from I Corinthians, the second reading, containing probably the earliest account of a communion service, Paul is outlining what happens. *'Beloved: I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'* I'll say those same words in a few minutes time.
- What you may not know is that this comes bang in the middle of a section of the letter where Paul is laying down the law about poor behaviour at communion services. Humiliating behaviour We're not just talking about whispering during the sermon or laughing at the rector. This was seriously, ignorantly, humiliating.
- At these early communion services, only 30 years or so after Jesus rose from the dead, people brought their own meals to share at this meal where the focal point was bread and wine. Some could afford very little. A stale crust or even less. After all, they were slaves in Corinth. Others enjoyed splashing out because it was a celebration. A bottle of champagne, a side of smoked salmon. Freshly baked artisan bread. They were surely the slave owners. But they did not enjoy sharing with other slaves. What should have been a shared meal quickly became extremely divisive. And Paul brings them back to order and issues a general ticking off. Best eat before you come and focus on the bread and wine if that is how you are going to behave!
- It could be said that the wealthy Corinthian picnickers were not serving the servant King. They were not washing the feet of their brother slaves. The very idea! Sadly that meant they were not free. That's probably easier to see from our perspective 2 000 years hence, than it would have been for the picnickers themselves. I wonder if Paul's words had any effect?
- In a few minutes time we will have a similar meal to the Corinthian Church, though hopefully rather more ordered and rather less divisive. A similar meal to Jesus' Last Supper. A similar meal to the unleavened bread of the Jews in Egypt.
- It's sometimes easy to forget that this ordered ritual is a precursor to betrayal, arrest, torture and death. The servant King going to his throne. Tonight we will follow him as he goes from the upper room and the nice meal, to the garden where he prayed in torment. He was still free. He could have changed his mind at any time. But if he had? ... Would he still have been free if he had run from the garden before he was arrested? I put it to you that his freedom lay in obedience and trusting his Father than in indulging his personal choice. His obedience was his glory when he said, *'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.'*
- If freedom is indeed serving the servant King, to what extent are you free? And to what extent do you feel free?
- As you share in the broken bread which is the body of Christ, ... as you sit, later on, in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying with Jesus, you may like to focus on freedom and what it implies to you. Consider your responsibilities and your commitments. Are they enabling you to serve the servant King? They may feel like a cross on your back, but that does not mean they are not Christ-centred and that does not mean that they are not your calling.
- Offer them to Jesus and see what he says in reply. Because three days' time is Easter Day and Jesus has a funny habit of transforming our burden ridden, anxiety laden caterpillar-like lives into something much more like a beautiful butterfly when we invite him to share.