

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

4th February 2024 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

FREE TO ...

‘I am free to ...’ How would you finish that sentence? The first thing that comes into your mind might be, ‘to do whatever I like’. But that’s not completely true, is it? We often say that we live in a ‘free country’, and we celebrated that again just over a week ago on Australia Day, but even in this great nation we are not completely free. I can’t go out and drive on the right-hand side of the road, take someone’s car if it takes my fancy, hit somebody if I don’t agree with them. And rightly so, we know that if we could all act and do exactly as we wanted all the time then this wouldn’t be such nice a nation to live in. Around our freedom then we have laws for our protection, especially for those who can’t protect themselves. So, what then is ‘freedom’?

How about this one, ‘I wish I was free to ...’? If you were free to do whatever you liked, what would it be? And now that I have lured you into that, would your choice be for yourself, or those close to you, or for the benefit of everyone? And then of course to have that kind of choice we need not only the freedom, but also the means. We can’t just always get that, can we? This week many people got excited and bought tickets to the Powerball draw with a \$200 million prize on offer. There were two winning tickets, so they get \$100 million each. We think, ‘Wow! They are free to do whatever they want’. But past experience of winners shows that isn’t the case, that for a combination of reasons the majority of those who win big in the end finish up with as much or even less than they had before. Money doesn’t necessarily bring freedom, and when we look at the lifestyles of the rich and famous nor necessarily does power or fame. To be free; we might wish for it, but how do we get it, and what do we do with it when we do?

Freedom. It's talked about a lot in the Bible, both in a physical sense especially in the Old Testament because God's people regularly found themselves as slaves, so God had to go and rescue them, and also, throughout the Bible, in a spiritual sense. Just like in our country, our free country, we have laws to keep everyone safe, God gave us laws in the Bible to enable us to both worship and serve Him and also to care for one another. But, human nature being what it is, instead of these laws helping to maintain and live in our freedom in God, they became a burden. One person who knew this very well is the writer of our reading today, the apostle Paul, who before he became a Christian was one of the Jewish Pharisees who lived by the Law, 613 of them in fact! They didn't have freedom in their faith, they had a very tight jail cell.

But Paul, as we know, had an encounter with Jesus that led to a complete turn around in his faith; he went from persecuting those who followed Jesus to becoming a Christian himself. He went from having God's Law as a burden to knowing that in Jesus dying for him he is now completely forgiven and brought back into a loving relationship with God. And what does Paul do with his newfound freedom? He becomes a slave to everyone, so he can win as many people as possible. For Paul those chains of restriction, and guilt, and obligation, have been shattered by God's love for him in Jesus, and his response is not just to walk away and now please himself, but to do what he can to both serve and worship God and to share this good news with others.

There is, as always, a lot in this reading, but the part which sums up very well our theme here is the last two sentences; 'I do everything I can to win everyone I possibly can. I do all this for the good news, because I want to share in its blessings.' (v. 22b, 23) What are Paul's two purposes in living out his freedom? To do whatever it takes to help others to know this love of God also. And that he himself continues to live in God's love so that he is not weighed down by sin and guilt again. He now lives under God's Law of love not because he has to in fear of the consequences, but because he wants to because he knows the new life and blessings it brings.

The freedom Paul has and which he talks about here is the freedom we also have as God's people; those who know His forgiveness and new life in Jesus. And now living in God's Law as a response to what He has done for us, not to earn it, we can take on the two goals or purposes he lists here also. What that means first of all is that we are free to love; we use our Christian freedom to share God's love with others. To finish that sentence I put to you at the beginning, we can now say, 'I am free to love others as God loves me'. Not what would always jump straight into our minds, is it? What does that look like? Putting others first. Doing our best to understand the viewpoints of others, even if we don't agree with them. Accepting people as who they are, and knowing it's not our place to judge. As much as we know we live in God's forgiveness also passing that on. Free to love.

We are also now free to share the good news of Jesus. In God's love for us we have the best news we could ever hope to have, news which is life changing. That Jesus died and rose for us means we are set free from being weighed down by having to do something to earn God's love, or from living under a burden of guilt that we will never be good enough to receive it. It's news which is for everyone. We share this with people as a part of how we live our lives each day; how we speak, how we act, how we respond. We know that people don't respond to having something pushed at them, most of us don't (the best way to get me to not watch a movie is to tell me I must see it!), so make sharing your faith a part of living your life. That's kind of what Paul is talking about here when he talks about what he does with different groups of people. I've shared before that I love it when people say to me after they've known me for a while, 'oh, you're a Christian' – hopefully they are not surprised for the wrong reasons. I always want to say, 'yes and I don't have two heads, but I am just like you'. Be open. Be natural. If it comes up, and it might, even be open about your struggles with your faith. As Paul did, in your freedom simply allow God to work through you in your everyday life.

And we are also now free to, live freely. That's again about the guilt we have been set free from. Imagine what it would have been like for Paul when he realised he didn't have to remember,

let alone live out, those 613 Laws every day! We have that same freedom, yet we still regularly put ourselves under what we might think are God's expectations of us, or perhaps more often, the expectations of others on us. The blessings of the good news are that God loves us unconditionally. The blessings of the good news are that while God does give us Laws to protect us and for the good of others, when we don't live up to them He forgives us. The blessings of the good news are that when we feel we are being called to do things which are just too difficult for us to do, we know we have God's strength and help with them. The blessings of the good news are that whatever is worrying us, bringing us down, hard for us to handle or face, we can bring all those things to God and ask for His help with them. The blessings of the good news are that we are now free to live freely; to live lives that trust and rely on God.

No wishing about it, we are now free to place ourselves under God's Law of love, so we can both share this and live our lives in Him. No wining numbers to guess, no impossible life to live, our perfect and lifechanging freedom comes because in His love God sent Jesus to die and rise for us. Free to be living in and sharing God's love each day. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

- If you were free to do whatever you want, buy whatever you want, live or go wherever you want, what would your choice be? Be honest with yourself; is your choice focussed on you, those close to you, or for the good of everyone?
- Paul says he will do whatever he can to help others to know God's love. How does this look for you? What opportunities to witness to your faith in normal everyday ways has God placed in your life? Do you find it easy to take up these opportunities, or are they a struggle for you? Give these opportunities to witness over to God, asking to Him to guide you and work through you in them.
- What are the blessings of the good news which you really value in your life? Is there anything; distractions, temptations, doubts and struggles, which threaten to take you away from living out your faith and the blessings this brings? Give these to God, asking Him to help you to freely live for Him.

Prayer: thank God for the freedom He gives to all His people through our faith in Jesus as our Saviour. Ask Him to help us to be faithful witnesses to His love, and to live our lives in Him each day.

Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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