

GALATIANS 3:23-4:7
FREEDOM!

We've all done it! There are two women standing beside the market stall: 'it is him, isn't it?' Or in the airport, trying to work out if it is 'him from Eastenders' or not! 'Is it really Sally Magnusson? She looks different in real life!' We've all done it; we've looked at someone in passing and not been quite sure if it is who we think it is! They've changed; mind you, it has been years since we last saw them and they've changed a bit, a bit older maybe, a bit greyer, but it is still them. Our two women beside the market stall are looking at the man and wondering; he looks familiar, but they're not sure about it; one has been away on holiday and they're catching up on the gossip, and the news, and what's been happening since she's been away. They're looking at this man and thinking he's familiar, but not quite sure from where! Her friend is laughing at her quietly because she knows what has gone on in last two weeks!

"Who does he look like?" "He looks like that madman who lives out in caves!" "Mmhh" says her friend. "No; it can't be!" "It can" and she begins to tell her friend the story of Jesus' healing the man who had been possessed by evil spirits. A man with a broken, troubled life; a man whose troubles were so bad that he was forced out of town to live in caves; a man who met Jesus one day and controversially, Jesus took the spirits out of man and let them go into the pigs who promptly threw themselves down the hill into the lake and were drowned. The man himself was healed, his life was restored, made complete, made whole. The whole thing was just a bit too much for the community because they asked Jesus to leave; but Jesus left behind a man who was changed, whole, and free and told him: "*Return home...*" (Luke 8:39)

There were all kinds of things about this man's life that had been distorted by his troubles, lots of things that we take for granted as part of normal, every-day life: his ability to live with other people was distorted, if not gone; he was no longer able to feed and clothe himself, his sense of self was gone, he had no clear picture of who he was; he could no longer act responsibly or contribute to the life of his local community. Jesus gave him all of these things back; Jesus restored him to life, his life was made whole again as Jesus' power went to work to heal him. This is all captured by one phrase in Luke's story: "*they found...*" (Luke 8:35b) The change was so dramatic that people were not sure what to make of it all and asked Jesus to leave!

Freedom is a precious commodity; we prize it! I couldn't resist the image of Mel Gibson as William Wallace and his speech from *Braveheart* about 'freedom!' There are all kinds of freedom: Wallace's kind – political freedom from the conquering army, or colonising power; financial freedom, no longer dependent on other's donations; personal freedoms of all sorts, to be free from fear, or oppression, to be free to worship openly, to be free to express your opinion, to be free to be yourself – there are all kinds of freedoms. But freedom can be risky or a hard thing to handle: the countries of Africa who fought long and hard for freedom from colonising power, have found it hard to hold their nation together in peace and prosperity; it is good for young people to fly the nest, but the big, wide world can be a scary place for them to be free from parents' control. On the surface, we look like people who are free, totally free, but when we scratch the surface, there are so many fears.

Children at school often don't feel free to express themselves because of the fear of the bully. Lots of us live with the constant fear of failure – Churches are very risk averse organisations partly because of the fear of failure. Many people in our culture live with self-loathing or lack of self-worth and live with that as a great burden round

their neck, or live life to please someone else, to do things in a certain way because that's the way so-&-so wants it; or are constantly put down by others with their nagging words or so-called 'funny jibes'. Some people feel constrained by their circumstances, not free to be themselves because they have responsibilities to others which at times are fine, but at other times they feel like a prison cell. Money can have a distorting effect on the way we view life, whether we have it or not!

In Galatians 3 and 4 Paul talks about freedom and shows us the ultimate blessing and fulfilment of life that is ours in Christ. He describes what God has been working up to for generations and has now completed in Christ. There is a real sense that not only is Jesus completing the picture that God has been painting, but that wholeness of life that Jesus came to bring is all about freedom and blessing for us as Christians. This is all about who we are, our identity, about who God has made us and what God has made us. We've spent a long time this spring on these issues because there is a sense that these are important for us and for our society and the challenge for us is to allow God's word to shape our view of ourselves and change that view if need be and challenge the culture in which we live that would shut us in a box and keep us tied down.

There are two pictures:

1. Slaves: "*Before this...*" (3:23) the law stands for all the rules and regulations that God gave Israel in the Old Testament. The original purpose of the law was to guide and lead the people in the kind of life they lived, that they live life in a good and right way. There are all sorts of principles of good behaviour there, mainly centred on 'love God; love other people.' But that law had a nasty side-effect: it made you aware that you'd broken it! That had consequences: first of all, it made you feel guilty for having broken it and guilt is a bad feeling; if all that the law does is show you where you've fallen down, then all it will do is induce a sense of guilt. Secondly, it instilled in you a drive to make sure you kept it better next time, so my next aim would have been to get it right and do better next time. So life under the law was lived by what I must be able to achieve, but with the constant fear of failure, faults, mistakes, guilt. So inside my head and my heart, I am a slave to the law, to keep it and afraid of it and my failures and guilt.

2. children under a tutor "*So also...*" (4:3) Roman children had a household slave who looked after them, called a 'paidagogus' who wasn't so much a teacher as a disciplinarian. It was his job to deliver the child to school, to make sure that he attended, and to make sure that the child also acquired the qualities that he needed to become a true man. (It was always male children!) Before Jesus came, God's work is not finished; "*so the...*" (3:24) that not only were we in prison as slaves, but under a tutor who will remind us of our faults and remind us of what we do not yet have.

Jesus has set us free: "*When the...*" (4:4f,7) 'Redeem' is a freedom word: if you put something in the pawn shop, you go to buy it back; you redeem it! If the slave-owner in the first century wanted to set a prized slave free, he paid the price to redeem the slave, he paid for his freedom and redeemed him. Redemption is a Bible word and it is all about God setting us free so that we are no longer held down by the law: all that drive to keep the law so that I might be a better person and all that guilt for having failed to keep it or please someone else – all of that is gone; we are free people, redeemed by Jesus and esp when He died on the cross. Jesus died to take away all of our faults, mistakes, sense of failure, guilt; because He did that, we are free, no longer slaves, but free to be the people God wants us to be.

We don't appreciate the huge difference in the first century world between slaves and sons; they were worlds apart; to be the son was to live in a different world; the son had all the rights and freedoms, the slaves had none. "so you..." (4:7) P doesn't have anything better with which to compare us; there is no higher privilege in his world that being a son of household. Come back to parable of prodigal Galatians son and father who welcomes his son home with all trappings of sonship: coat, ring, shoes; there was nothing more, nothing better to give; this was best and highest privilege he could bestow. For P, biggest and highest privilege that God can bestow on us is to call us His children; we are children in family of God; that is who and what we really are; highest and best and biggest privilege that God can give; whatever is true of Jesus now as an heir in God's family, one day inherit all glory of heaven, that is true of us also; we shall inherit glory with Him.

This is liberating stuff. This sets us free to be ourselves if we take it seriously and allow it to change the way we think. "It doesn't matter how much you oppress me, I am loved and accepted by God; it doesn't matter what you think of me, I am loved and accepted by God; it doesn't matter if you put me down by your words, I am loved and accepted by God; it doesn't matter if I'm not perfect and have made mistakes, I am loved and accepted by God; it doesn't matter if you bully me and call me names, I am loved and accepted by God; it doesn't matter if I'm not right size or shape, I am loved and accepted by God; it doesn't matter if I fail, I am still loved and accepted by God." None of this is an excuse for being lax and careless about life, and in another sense it really does matter how people behave and some of this kind of behaviour needs challenged and changed. But here, nonetheless, the gospel says this is who we are in Christ; we are God's children, loved and accepted because of what Jesus has done, because Jesus has set us free to be ourselves. Really, truly, nothing else ultimately matters; so throw off chains that tie us down!

Gareth Malone is a conductor of choirs; he's a bit of a TV star. He takes people who are afraid to sing, frightened of what other people might think and sets them free to sing and enjoy singing; he gives them confidence and an enormous sense of significance that enables them to achieve great things. This is what the gospel does for us: it gives us a new way of looking at ourselves; ultimately what matters is not what other people think of us, not what we're made to feel by world, but that in Jesus we are loved and accepted by God; we are children in God's family; there is nothing higher, nothing better that we could ever have; this is who we are! Here for us is a confidence, an enormous sense of significance; we are no longer held down by our sense of guilt and failure and not making grade; we are whole, complete, restored people! A man was dressed and in his right mind because Jesus healed him. What will it take for us to be free? "So you..." (4:7)