

**7<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

**Exodus 16:2–15**

This week some of us went to the Gower on a church retreat looking at the theme of Wisdom and we studied the book of Ecclesiastes. One of our topics was about living your own life and enjoying life. I used a story from Rob Parsons book the Wisdom House. He wrote that a little while ago an Australian palliative nurse called Bronnie Ware began to blog about her experiences as she nursed people in the last weeks and months of their lives. These patients often shared their deepest feelings with her, and Bronnie said hat time and time again they mentioned the same regrets. She wrote a book about it called The top Five Regrets of the Dying. The first one she mentions is ‘I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me’.

Many people ask the question ‘Who am I?’. Of course some will laugh at that, saying the answer is on your birth certificate and there’s no point delving any further. But those who whisper that question to themselves know why they do so: it is because they have spent so much time trying to be like somebody

else – perhaps to become the person others want them to be – that, along the way, they have lost their own identity.

Some of us have spent our lives trying to please other people, our teachers, our lovers, our friends, and our church. We have dressed in a way that we hope they will like, or we have taken subjects at school that they wanted us to study. We have believed things that we thought we had to believe and accept. We have tried to be witty, sexy, academic or sporty because we desperately wanted to be part of the group. Perhaps we have even taken a career path just to please somebody else.

Rob Parsons talks about Karaoke. It’s made up of two Japanese’s words, one meaning ‘empty’ and the other ‘orchestra’, and it allows people to sing along to well-known songs that other people have made famous. There’s always a backing track, and you read the words from an autocue. If you really get into it as an art form, you practice the movements of the people you are imitating, and even dress like them. But karaoke has at its heart a dreadful dilemma: the better you get at it, the more you look and sound like somebody else. Now, in itself, that’s not a problem

unless the day comes when you want to sing your own song. Logically there shouldn't be any issue with you doing this, but the second you open your mouth to sing you realise you have no words or moves of your own. Pretty soon, the audience is yelling for you to switch on the same old backing track and climb into the well-worn costume again. And in that moment you discover that you have spent so much of your life trying to be somebody else that both you and the world have missed the person you are.

Some of us spend our entire lives trying to be somebody else. The experiences we have, and the personality, gifts and talents that we possess, may not be what we would have chosen. There's an old joke about a man complaining about his books and saying, 'when they were giving out ears, I thought they said 'beers' and I asked for two large ones. When it came to noses I thought they said 'roses' and asked for a big red one. And when they said chins, I thought they said 'gins' and asked for a double. But for better or worse, what we have is us. And when we decide to work on what we have got there is often many surprises. But the issue is many of us are trapped in being the person someone wants us to be.

Our sermon themes during May will follow the daily Bible readings in the IBRA notes, focussing on the chapters 16-40 in the book of Exodus. Exodus in the Old Testament tells the story of how the Israelites are liberated from slavery in Egypt, escaping the tyranny and oppression of Pharaoh, crossing the Red sea and wandering in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. We pick up the story after the escape and when they start there wilderness experience. This sermon series is going to be about how we cope with the freedom of faith, how we relate to God and know God's presence and provision for our lives. How we become the people we are meant to be, how we live in the freedom of faith and respond to our Creator. But freedom can be a scary thing.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul takes up the dynamics of these passages and stories from Exodus about what happened to the Israelites when they wandered in the wilderness and ran out of water and food and notes that they tell us about Israel's failures and their consequences. Any given generation of Israel or the church can forfeit its place within God's purpose.

The Israelites have just discovered that freedom from Pharaoh by no means solves all their problems. It

only introduces them to the next challenge. When God does something new and creative it is tempting to think that everything now is going to be wonderful but the early church soon found it was having to deal with people being put in jail and people falsifying their pledges with one group complaining about another group being neglected when food was distributed (Acts 4-6). It was repeating Israel's experience even in the sense that it involved down to earth questions like whether you have enough to eat and that it resulted in division in the community. Israel complained against Moses and Aaron (Moses Brother); one Christian group complained against another.

The psalms make clear that it is fine to complain to God about things that happen to us and about the way people are treating us, though admittedly they don't include God's reply to those prayers and it wouldn't be surprising if God sometimes responded as straight as Israel spoke. At the end of chapter 15 the Israelites don't complain against God but against Moses. It requires less courage to criticize your human leaders than to criticize God. Fortunately Moses knows what to do when people complain against you. He cries out to God, as leaders need to do if they are to handle the

pressure rather than giving as good as they get and turning the relationship into one of mutual recrimination. Perhaps he's crying out to God on their behalf which is also certainly another key aspect of a leader's job. God's response is to tell him to throw a tree branch into the pool of bitter water they had found. This will have seemed like a silly suggestion but maybe Moses could imagine it was not, after all he had considerable experience of God doing exotic tricks.

Exodus adds that the story establishes a principle of god's dealings with the people. An experience like the one that they have just gone through is a kind of testing. Their failure doesn't actually matter. They need to learn from it. The rule is live your life according to god's bidding and God will make things work out. They then come to a place with abundant water, which encourages their faith.

At the start of chapter 16 the way they complain about their food supply suggests that they have learnt nothing.

In our reading from Exodus the Israelites were getting hungry and fed up and started to complain. The whole lot of them are complaining. Verse 2 'the Israelites all complained to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. They said 'If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots and had plenty of bread! But you have brought us out into this wilderness to let this whole assembly starve to death'

As people do when they are angry and fed up and displaced they start to twist others motives for doing what they did. As if Moses deliberately brought the Israelites out of slavery to starve them to death in the wilderness. Honestly - people – sometimes there is no pleasing them. We're going to die they thought. – do we die in the fleshpots of Egypt, as slaves being brutalised and oppressed? Or would we prefer to die in the wilderness – free yet starving? They are all saying they'd rather go back to what they knew. Jewish rabbis have a saying that while the people got out of Egypt in a day, it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the people. At its core, the "slavery complex" is to internalize powerlessness and a victim mentality. Even though Moses had led people out of slavery, they still complained," why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us?

At that moment, the Hebrew people were ready to settle for slavery rather than struggle for freedom and justice.

People can be trapped in old ways and patterns of life. They can be trapped in destructive lifestyles and oppressive relationships. They can be stuck in manipulative and controlling churches. If you manage to break free from those situations freedom can be scary. It's often easier to go back to what you knew best. At least you had the food you wanted. No matter that you were exploited, oppressed and in slavery. At least we had food!

I used to live in Nottingham and outside the city there is a farm called Manna Farm. It's a place where drug addicts can go and learn how to live without drugs. Manna farm was set up by Christians, some of whom had problems with drugs themselves in the past. They called it Manna farm because, just as the Israelites believed God sent the manna to rescue them when they were in a desperate situation, the farm helps rescue people today who are desperate. But they need support in their new found freedom, breaking long

established patterns of behaviour and dependencies. Freedom is scary.

Do you have freedom in your life?

What is your manna? What rescues you, sustains you in times of hardship and helps us cope with new found freedom.

The Israelites were in the wilderness. They had been wandering for nearly forty days. They were starving. This was an environment of acute risk and deep jeopardy. They were crying out for help and God answered by giving them manna from heaven.

This story about the Israelites in crisis contained object lessons that would be principles for the new free and liberated community of the Israelites.

There is the principle of the Sabbath – having rest from your labours – not overworking yourselves or your employees. The Israelites are instructed to gather twice as much manna on the sixth day as they normally gather, the implication being that they will then not need to gather any manna on the seventh (Sabbath) day.

Then there is the principle of looking after the poor and concern for equality. In verses 17-18. However much people gathered it amounted to the same. Those who had gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage. This is not a charter for laziness, but a way of saying that God met each person's needs completely, and independently of the human competitiveness that would undoubtedly result in some getting more, at the expense of those who gathered less. There was enough for each person's need but not enough for each person's greed.

Oh that the world of politics and economics were so simple.

This week President Trump started to dismantle Obama care. His plans will mean 28 million more people will not have basic health care, the rich and elderly will see huge tax cuts while the lower income households will see their health insurance premiums rise. I wonder if people realised this would happen when they voted for him to make America Great again. Elections change things and have consequences. You need to read the small print and the manifestos and not just rely on sound bites and trivia.

Today of course the ballot papers are out for our vote on same sex marriage. The elders have done everything to try and ensure this is a free and confidential vote. Use your freedom to look to God and in relationship ask what is the way you should vote. Don't vote because culture says one thing. Don't vote because your church background and previous teaching says you should vote in a certain way. Of course all those influences will need to be weighed up. But you are free, in this church at least, to prayerfully discern before God what you should do, what your response is.

Some will say, Oh this is hard – I wish I was back in wherever, where I didn't get a choice, it was all so certain and straight forward then.

Sorry, like the Israelites we are a people of pilgrimage, a journey of faith, where we need to keep on our toes and keep in day to day relationship with the one who leads us on.

The purpose of the manna from heaven was to put the Israelites into a daily reliance on God their deliverer and provider of freedom. You have to trust that things will work out if you do what God says.

Freedom in scripture is not freedom to live apart from God, though in God's mercy God allows us the

freedom to live as if God doesn't exist. True freedom is found in living free from other influences so you can be free to live in relationship to your Creator. To have that ongoing daily relationship.

In the film, Chariots of Fire Olympic Runner Eric Liddell says, 'I believe that God made me for a purpose, but he has also made me fast. And when I run, I feel God's pleasure. Do you believe you were made for a purpose? Do you believe that god has given you gifts for that purpose? The truth is that we can't run on any track except our own. But to be really free we need to run with God who created us, who wants us to find that purpose and the freedom faith and trust in Him brings.

Sometimes you have to have the courage to switch off the karaoke machine and announce to the audience, 'This is me'. Sometimes you have to break free from the old life in Egypt and slavery to Pharaoh, and press on to the Promised Land of freedom with God. And then for good or ill, give it everything you've got. And try not to grumble as you do it.

**Bibliography:** R Parsons, The Wisdom House,  
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