

Freedom – and its owner

As you will no doubt have guessed from the not-so-cryptic title of this talk, I would like to talk about the subject of freedom in the spiritual life. It has been an important theme in spirituality, from the very beginnings of our religion (and, in terms of Christianity as our religion) even before, receiving as it does a rich treatment in Pre-Christian Judaism. Needless to say, it continues to be important for the monastic writers too, and indeed for us as Christians seeking to live our faith. I wonder, though, whether this is obvious. When we speak to people of religion, or Christianity or monastic life, if we were to play one of those free-association word games, is 'freedom' really the first word to come people's minds?

My suspicion is that it is not. More likely, I would guess, ideas such as constraint, regulations, rules and maybe even simply 'no' (a word that gets a lot of bad press in our own time) are perhaps the first words that occur to people. I don't know whether you ever came across that book, 'How to survive being married to a Catholic,' designed – oddly enough – for marriage preparation when one of the partners is not Catholic. It is, I think, a good (if witty) treatment of some of what must seem unusual to people encountering the Church for the first time. Anyhow, the witty cartoon at the beginning of the chapter on sex is (from memory) a huge speech bubble, simply with the word, 'no' written there! Maybe it is no surprise that people get that idea that for some people, rules are what it is all about; after all, the Church has a lot of rules. Some of us live in a self-confessed way 'under a rule and an abbot'. Where, then, is freedom in all of this, and what – if anything – is the proper relationship between freedom and rules?

In relation to freedom itself, I think we can all agree that this is something that is important to us. Maybe one of the most terrifying things we can imagine is being imprisoned against our will. It is not for nothing that society uses that as a most dire punishment and remedy for various crimes. In our own times, one of the things most

repugnant to western democracies (and no doubt others too) is the phenomenon of slavery, a constant, life-long, oppressive imprisonment, if you like. Perhaps 'slavery', then, is what we are hoping to be free from, in life and in the spiritual life.

This is a view that is certainly supported by the tradition. Think of the Old Testament. The people who will later become the Israelites, go down into Egypt with good reason: to escape the oppression of famine. Alas, having been rescued from famine, they soon come to experience another form of oppression: the oppression of being enslaved to Pharaoh. This becomes intolerable; they go from being effective workers (even it is forced labour), to having to suffer the fearful vindictiveness of Pharaoh (think of them having to make bricks with less and less straw, and being beaten if the bricks do not drop off the conveyer belt at the end of the day). If you only had one choice in a competition to suggest what the main theme of the Old Testament is, you might well plump for 'God's intervening to free the people from slavery, and lead them to a land of their own, the promised land.' So much for the aspect of 'freedom from'.

What, though, about 'freedom for'? As so often in life, it is not really enough in the spiritual life to know what we want; we need really to know why we want it. Again, perhaps we should look again at that Exodus story. Why did the Israelites want to leave Egypt? According to Exodus, the Lord had Moses say to Pharaoh: 'Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.' In other words, the purpose of leaving Egypt was not just a rest from the brickworks; the people were being invited to be free for the Lord: for a relationship with their God.

Well maybe that is a nice story, one that we know well. It is quite well written indeed, isn't it? But is it anything else? In the letter to the Romans (as I quoted in a previous Home Retreat on continuing with *lectio divina*, St Paul says that, 'Whatever was written in former times, was written for our instruction.' What happens - and is reported in the Bible as having happened - to the ancient Israelites, is not just quaint history, like some sacred version of the *Peloponnesian Wars*; no, it is something that is very relevant

to us. The journey of salvation history, as traced in the scriptures, is something that played out – we believe – in the life of Christ, and it has to play out in our lives too, assuming we want to get to the place where the journey lands: the Promised Land, where we too can be totally free to sacrifice to the Lord. Please don't think that this is some sort of pious theory: 'It says it in the bible, so it must be true (despite all evidence to the contrary).' It is not that. It is the experience of people trying to live the spiritual life over many generations in the Church: that is how it is, in broad terms.

Having worked out, then, that what we are after is a sort of freedom from spiritual slavery, and having worked out that this is so that we can be free to sacrifice to the Lord, perhaps we should ask how we get out of Egypt; once out, what happens in our three day journey into the wilderness; and what about this sacrifice business, on the other side of the wilderness?

Getting out of Egypt

I suppose we might see Egypt, in spiritual terms, as a sort of metaphor for all that enslaves us in life. I suppose the problem is that sometimes we are so taken up with the making of the bricks that we don't spend any time reflecting on what this *life* is that we are living at the moment; is it a life, in fact? Is there, in the way our modern world often asks, nothing more to life than this? The first step then is perhaps to get some self-knowledge. Who are we concretely at the moment? This has to be viewed, though, together with another important question: Who and what were we created to be? This is not the place to go through it in detail with quotes from the fathers of the Church giving Chapter and verse, but suffice to say that it is a firm tenet of the teaching of the Church that, as human beings created in the image and likeness of God (maybe a story for another day), we have an immense dignity, by nature and by God's design: we were made to be sons and daughters of God. We have an enormous inheritance to claim: a share in God's own divine nature. But we seem to have been sold into slavery. Worse: so often, we have sold ourselves into slavery, and for a cheap price. Once we know that, it gives us some much-needed perspective on our existence in the here and now. Is it really up to all that much? Am I really content to stick with

the *status quo*? Having finally heard properly of this great inheritance that awaits me, am I really going to leave for a next of kin to claim? Surely not. We know we have to start the journey, but so much seems to hold us back. The key word for what we need to cultivate here is perhaps 'detachment'. In the monastic life, this comes under the broader umbrella of 'asceticism'.

Detachment is, obviously enough, the opposite. We need to understand detachment, and its role, properly. We are not called to people who are totally detached from everything. We are called to be people totally attached to God. Once we start to examine ourselves, we come to know well enough that there are things which attract the tentacles of our will, things that are not God, and which might lead us away in fact. If this is the case, then we need to try to begin, with the help of God, to prise these tentacles away from their much beloved targets, and – importantly – to attach them to God. Usually, this involves what we normally think of as saying 'no' to ourselves – our frothy, superficial selves, that is. But not to worry: it could also be described as saying yes to our deeper, more authentic selves.

Asceticism, then, is not a question of doing a range of more or less arbitrary decisions, in the hope that, in so doing, we will somehow build up spiritual credit at the Bank of God, credit with which we can purchase something precious and important. No: it is a training of the will, following the impulses of grace, to be more likely to choose God in any given situation. True, sometimes there are disciplines like fasting, which can help us to be able to be disciplined in small situations, so that we might stand a chance of becoming disciplined in bigger situations, but the goal always has to be attachment to God. This is where rules come in. The Latin word for rule, *regula*, seems to refer to a sort of trellis: a framework on which something grows into a particularly beautiful and ordered shape. Rules – real rules – are good things; they are the trellis on which our life grows into an ordered, beautiful, free whole.

Asceticism, then, is important, but it is also no joke. If we are to avoid the pitfalls that can beset ascetic endeavours, we need to have wise spiritual advice, spiritual advice that can see the perspective of our spiritual life in a way that perhaps escapes us.

Journeying through the wilderness

If 'detachment' is the watch word at the beginning of the journey (to recur, probably, at later stages), perhaps the key word for this second stage is 'perseverance'. Again, let's look at the story of the Exodus. The escape from Egypt was exhilarating, and the people no doubt felt the weight of the brickmaking being almost literally lifted off their shoulders. But once this initial exhilaration was over, what then? In short not an easy ride. Trials. Difficulties. Frustrations. Hunger. Thirst. And so on. In this context, what drifted into view? Well, figuratively, a fence with some suspiciously green-looking grass on the other side of it, the green green grass of Egypt, to plagiarise the song title.

In the hardships of the wilderness, the people begin to long precisely for what they have left behind so emphatically: the onions and garlic; the fleshpots. How reasonable the Egyptians were, on reflection; why have we double-crossed them for this?

Again, this is going to happen to us on our spiritual Exodus, too. The key things seems to be, on the one hand, to expect the temptations – we may as well call them what they are. These are a normal part of the spiritual life: they show us our vulnerabilities, and the dependencies we have when, perhaps, we might otherwise be quite unaware of them. The second thing is to persevere in our good intent to continue the journey out of Egypt. If, like the people of Israel, we find ourselves wondering whether dependence was all that bad after all, let us remember what dependence means, literally: hanging off something. (Think by the fingernails.) If that something should – as these things so often do – prove unstable, we may have quite a fall.

Perseverance, then, is the watch word for this second stage. Yes – it needs endurance. But, with the grace of God, if we keep our eyes on the prize, it is possible – whatever we might think or fear.

Sacrificing to the God of Israel

What about this sacrifice that we are free to do after our three days journeying out of Egypt, once we have begun to let go of the more injurious dependences we have built up over the years? Well firstly, when you hear 'sacrifice', remember that the essential

thing about a sacrifice – a real sacrifice – is not the killing of some symbolic victim; no, it is rather, at heart, a whole-hearted offering of something to God. Ideally, that something will really be a someone, and the someone will be ourselves. An offering of ourselves – all that we are – to God in love. As paradoxical as it seems, this is perfect freedom.

If it such a good thing, why are we so reluctant? Perhaps it is because we worry that, if we are too enthusiastic, God may just take us up on our offer, and there may be nothing left for us. But this is not true. Christ is really, the only human person to have been fully alive by his own power. The more we attach ourselves to him, the more we are incorporated into his body – his human body. And the more we share in that humanity, the more we share in the divinity which is united with it. And in that divinity, we receive everything, including our very selves. Truly, it is in giving everything that we receive everything.

Suggestions

1. Examine your situation at the moment. What are the positive things? Where are you beginning to make some real progress in being attached to God, in being dependent upon him? On the other hand, what is holding you back most obviously at the moment? In the long run, you may wish to take some advice from a spiritual guide, to avoid the pitfalls of missing something obvious or (perhaps more commonly) of mistaking seeking to jettison something that is either not a particularly negative influence in our life or even something beneficial or essential.
2. Do some *lectio divina* on one of the following texts. Do they speak to your experience of the spiritual life in any way?

Numbers 11:1-15

11 Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. ²But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. ³So that place was called Taberah,^[a] because the fire of the Lord burned against them.

⁴The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

⁷Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. ⁸The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. ⁹When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

¹⁰Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors'?" ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favor in your sight – and do not let me see my misery."

Psalm 106

A Confession of Israel's Sins

¹Praise the Lord!

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

²Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,
or declare all his praise?

³Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times.

⁴Remember me, O Lord, when you show favour to your people;
help me when you deliver them;

⁵that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage.

⁶Both we and our ancestors have sinned;
we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.

⁷Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt,
did not consider your wonderful works;
they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love,
but rebelled against the Most High^[a] at the Red Sea.^[b]

⁸Yet he saved them for his name's sake,
so that he might make known his mighty power.

⁹He rebuked the Red Sea,^[c] and it became dry;
he led them through the deep as through a desert.

¹⁰So he saved them from the hand of the foe,
and delivered them from the hand of the enemy.

¹¹The waters covered their adversaries;

not one of them was left.
12 Then they believed his words;
they sang his praise.
13 But they soon forgot his works;
they did not wait for his counsel.
14 But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness,
and put God to the test in the desert;
15 he gave them what they asked,
but sent a wasting disease among them.
16 They were jealous of Moses in the camp,
and of Aaron, the holy one of the Lord.
17 The earth opened and swallowed up Dathan,
and covered the faction of Abiram.
18 Fire also broke out in their company;
the flame burned up the wicked.
19 They made a calf at Horeb
and worshiped a cast image.
20 They exchanged the glory of God^[d]
for the image of an ox that eats grass.
21 They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,
22 wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.^[e]
23 Therefore he said he would destroy them —
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him,
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.
24 Then they despised the pleasant land,
having no faith in his promise.
25 They grumbled in their tents,
and did not obey the voice of the Lord.
26 Therefore he raised his hand and swore to them
that he would make them fall in the wilderness,
27 and would disperse^[f] their descendants among the nations,
scattering them over the lands.
28 Then they attached themselves to the Baal of Peor,
and ate sacrifices offered to the dead;
29 they provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds,
and a plague broke out among them.
30 Then Phinehas stood up and interceded,
and the plague was stopped.
31 And that has been reckoned to him as righteousness
from generation to generation forever.
32 They angered the Lord^[g] at the waters of Meribah,
and it went ill with Moses on their account;

³³ for they made his spirit bitter,
and he spoke words that were rash.
³⁴ They did not destroy the peoples,
as the Lord commanded them,
³⁵ but they mingled with the nations
and learned to do as they did.
³⁶ They served their idols,
which became a snare to them.
³⁷ They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;
³⁸ they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan;
and the land was polluted with blood.
³⁹ Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and prostituted themselves in their doings.
⁴⁰ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people,
and he abhorred his heritage;
⁴¹ he gave them into the hand of the nations,
so that those who hated them ruled over them.
⁴² Their enemies oppressed them,
and they were brought into subjection under their power.
⁴³ Many times he delivered them,
but they were rebellious in their purposes,
and were brought low through their iniquity.
⁴⁴ Nevertheless he regarded their distress
when he heard their cry.
⁴⁵ For their sake he remembered his covenant,
and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
⁴⁶ He caused them to be pitied
by all who held them captive.
⁴⁷ Save us, O Lord our God,
and gather us from among the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise.
⁴⁸ Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
And let all the people say, "Amen."
Praise the Lord!