True Freedom
John 8:31-37

We're looking at John's gospel and at that part where Jesus is in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. And as a feast, it was a celebration of God delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt and leading them to freedom, through the wilderness, by the light, the fire of his presence, and as he did - providing water for them.

And over the last few weeks we've seen how Jesus says that fire and that water point to him - because he's the ultimate light to lead you and the ultimate water to satisfy you.

But get to v31 and John says, 'So Jesus said to the Jews *who had believed him*…' And that sounds hopeful, doesn't it? Criticisms and accusations have been flying at him, but finally there are some who believe in him.

Except, appearances can be deceptive, can't they?

And things are going well until Jesus mentions slavery, and its opposite, freedom. Because there's nothing quite like slavery to get a debate going, is there? Think of Black Lives Matter, or of how the UK government has recently come under sustained pressure to pay reparations to those nations who suffered under the slave trade. Why? Because slavery is wrong, and wrongs should be righted.

And yet, what becomes clear is that Jesus is talking about a different kind of slavery. And a kind that's *even more* controversial.

So, we're going to look at three things: the desire for freedom, the problem of freedom, and the way to true freedom.

The Desire for Freedom
Now, a Brit getting involved in American politics never goes well, but in the Declaration of Independence it says, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, *that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*.'

Liberty. Freedom. An unalienable right. Now they were speaking out of the 18th Century Enlightenment sea that they were swimming in, and yet, that desire for freedom was not new, was it?

Verses 31-32: 'So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, *and the truth will set you free*."'

And Jesus is simply taking it for granted that freedom is something they, and we want. And he's not wrong, is he? I mean, this is the Feast of Tabernacles, they're celebrating Israel's deliverance from… what? Slavery. And why had God freed them? Because he had heard the cries of the slaves. They had had enough of being slaves.

And among Jesus twelve disciples, who were probably stood there listening to him saying this, was Simon *the Zealot*. Simon the fully paid up member of a group committed to the violent overthrow of Roman rule. Why? Because they wanted to be free.

Or fast forward to our own era and George Orwell's best-selling book, *1984,* written 75 years ago. Why is it still read? Why does it still resonate years later? Because it's about freedom and freedom

from a crushing totalitarian state. And blundering in where angels fear to tread, did you notice in the US election how both sides accused the other of being a totalitarian - a fascist or a communist? But why would labelling your opponent like that win any votes? Unless, on left and right, we want to be free. We don't want others telling us what to do.

And today we describe sex-trafficking as modern day slavery. We speak of financial or sexual freedom, or gender equality, which used to be called women's *liberation*, or we talk of the freedom of personal discovery: Free to be Me. And in each case what we're after is the freedom to be the person, or live the life, I want to live.

So if freedom is what we all want, why do the people Jesus is speaking to respond the way they do? Verse 33, 'They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

You see, that's not them with their interest piqued and wanting to engage in further debate, is it? Like, 'fascinating you should say that Jesus, what's your take on this freedom thing then?' No, they are taking exception to what Jesus has just said.

Why? Do they just not know their history? 'We've never been enslaved to anyone…' forgetting that the whole point of the feast they're at was to celebrate their deliverance from slavery. Forgetting that it wasn't just Egypt they'd had to serve but Assyria and Babylonia and Greece and now Rome. So do they respond like that because, sure they were patriots and nationalists, but they also hadn't been paying attention in history class, or had no idea of current political realities?

It's unlikely isn't it? After all, it was precisely their history that drove their religious and political zeal.

Or, in appealing to Abraham as their father are they saying that, just like he turned away from idols, so they are not enslaved to the false gods of the nations around them, including their Roman masters? Maybe.

But more likely, they get, at least in part, something of what Jesus is saying. That you can think you're free, you can even be partying at a Feast of Freedom, when in reality, you're still a slave. Because that's what Jesus is saying and that's why they get huffy.

But it's not lost any of it's ability to shock, has it? I mean imagine a march, or a festival, organised to celebrate some group or other's sexual freedom, or the freedom to do with their bodies, or their money, or their time, or to own and carry guns, or to say with their mouth, whatever they want, and imagine taking the stage and addressing the crowd and saying, 'you're not free, you're slaves. In fact, the very way you're pursuing freedom is the very thing that's enslaving you.' How would it go down?

Yet, that's exactly what Jesus is saying. And not just to *them* but to all of us. That you can have everything you want, including the freedom to be whoever and live however you want, and still be a slave.

Why?

The Trouble with Freedom

Look at v34, ‘Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you…”’ And whenever Jesus says that you know that truly, truly trouble is coming. Truly, truly Jesus is going to say something that gets your hackles up, that’s going to contradict and run at 180 degrees to the perceived wisdom or accepted culture of the day. Truly, truly, you are *not* going to like this.

Verse 34, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”

Now, today, our culture tells you, you’re basically good and you just need help to live out what you really are. And any enslavement comes from outside you. It might be poverty or traditional expectations or oppressive structures, but whatever it is, whatever is hindering you from being you, is imposed on you, from outside you.

And you only have to look at race-based slavery or sex-trafficking to know there is such a thing as external oppression. But Jesus is saying that the greatest problem is not outside you. It’s inside. That the greatest enslavement is not political or financial or even physical. Instead, all those wrongs flow from a much deeper wrong, from a much more ancient slavery. A slavery to sin.

You see, if our current culture says, you’re basically good, it’s also redefined sin. Which today is little more than not being true to yourself, while the unforgivable sin is not letting anyone else be true to themselves.

But the Bible says, no, sin, at its root, is wanting to be God, to push him to the periphery of life, and take his place at the centre of your life. And it traces the roots of sin all the way back to Eden, and the very first sin, and the desire to be free of God, free of his rules, free of him telling us what’s right and wrong, free to decide for myself those things. The desire to be *totally* free.

And Jesus is saying, it’s that that’s enslaving you. And that slavery to self - me at the centre with God dethroned - is a far greater and deeper problem than slavery to Caesar or Pharaoh, or any modern day version of them. And it’s out of that slavery that every other slavery flows, like sewage from a sewer.

Now you might go, ‘Hang on, I get why self-centredness is a problem, but ‘everyone who practices sin is *a slave* of sin’? I mean, which of us don’t sometimes act selfishly? But that hardly makes us *slaves*!’

Except, consider the two ways Jesus means this. Firstly, that when we sin we prove we’re enslaved to it. I mean, if you eat a peanut butter sandwich and start blowing up like a puffer fish, you’re probably allergic, aren't you? So, when we act selfishly, when we behave in ways that say, ‘no *I* want to be the centre’ it says something about the state of our hearts.

Before I became a Christian, I was challenged by a friend at school to stop swearing. And we were standing outside a classroom waiting for the teacher to arrive, and I don’t know what I said, but I must have said something and he said, ‘you swear so much, you need to stop.’ And like these guys, I was offended, and said, ‘sure, I will.’ But I couldn’t. I tried, but every time I tried the words were already out. And over subsequent weeks it dawned on me, I cannot make myself better.

But that was me just realising what Jesus says here, I swore because I was bound to swear.

I mean, just try for a week, or a month, to be less selfish, less self-centred, or sinful. What do you think will happen? Firstly, you'll probably begin to see just how often you are selfish, self-centred and sinful. And secondly, if you move on to examine your motives, and why you want to improve, what will you discover? That even that desire is about you.

You see, think again about their response. Doesn't it prove the very point Jesus is making? Doesn't their pride at *not* being slaves show just how enslaved to pride they are?

I mean imagine someone said to you 'you are so proud' and you immediately get defensive and go 'no I'm not', might not that just possibly be an indication that you are, in fact, very proud and what people think of you matters just that bit too much?

And Jesus is saying, we think, and say, and do these things - we sin - because that's the bent of our hearts: we're bound to self, we're enslaved to sin.

But there's another way Jesus means this: that when we sin we become *further* enslaved to it. Sin curves us inward, and the more we sin, the further in we curve. Because the way we live and the company we keep becomes self-reinforcing, self-validating.

And so Jesus is saying, far from total freedom leaving you free, it leaves you more chained than ever. It's the freedom of the addict. Free to shoot up whenever they want, but it's not true freedom, is it?

I mean, take a room-full of musicians. Will they create something beautiful if each one exercises total freedom? And the violinist takes the percussionists sticks and starts bashing her violin like a drum. And the double bass player gets on his hands and knees and is blowing into it like it's a trumpet. And the oboist nicks a trombone and using it like a violin bow on his oboe. And rather than follow the composer's score, it's a free for all, everyone playing any note, at any time, in any order.

Will that create beauty? Or chaos?

You see, deep down we all know that it's the limitation of freedom that lets beauty flourish. Gershwin said of Beethoven, 'that boy Beethoven has it…every note is exactly where it should be.' And the musician can only recreate Beethoven's wonder if he's willing to sacrifice his freedom and play those notes in their right place at the right time. And he can only play them well if he's spent hours sacrificing his freedom, and practiced.

So if that's true for music, why would we think that to create a life of beauty things would be different? That total freedom can never do it.

Instead, as you look at how beauty in sport or art or architecture comes when it's performed within boundaries, ask yourself, could it be that true beauty in life comes by living within the boundaries of the Creator? Boundaries within which there is a *true* freedom.

The Way to True Freedom

Verse 35, where Jesus says, "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever."

You see, the problem with being a slave in the ancient world was not just the lack of autonomy, or having this slave-master threatening you. It's that you could be thrown out of the house at any time, with no social safety net. You had no right to remain, because you had no right to inherit. And a slave and a son might be born, and grow up, and live in the same house together all their lives, but only one will inherit the house. Only one will come into the good of all the father has, and it's not the slave.

The only hope for the slave was for their master to free them and then adopt them as his son and heir. And Jesus is saying, the same is true for us.

You see, like a slave, you could try and buy your own freedom, you could try and fix yourself. But a slave who bought his freedom still does not inherit, because he's still not a son. In fact, he would have to leave the house - so he's further away from inheriting than ever.

And trying to fix your inward bent to sin yourself also makes the problem worse. Because whose strength are you relying on to swear less, or be less proud, or less selfish? Your own. But it's us 'going it on our own' that got us into this mess in the first place. And so legalistic religion, or moralism, or 'just try harder', leaves us further away from the Father and his life of blessing than ever.

So how can you enjoy the freedom of a son, and the life God has for you, instead of the relentless inward curve of a slave?

Well, Jesus tells us. Firstly, **by abiding**. Verse 31, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples."

And to abide in Jesus' word means to live in it, to let your life be shaped and formed by it. You see, when you abide in a house, you see the world through the windows of that house, don't you? So when you abide in Jesus' word you're choosing to see all of life through the window of his word. And let him shape you, rather than you trying to force him into your mould.

But to abide also means to stay. And just like a slave had to stay if he wanted to inherit, so to enjoy all that God has for you, you don't quit the house of Jesus' word in search of your own thing. You don't run out of the house the moment you hear the ice-cream van of temptation making a noise.

But to abide is also to rest. Every other religious leader wants to give you a to-do list of 4, 5, 8 things to do. But Jesus says, no, rest. Rest in my word.

But secondly, as you do that, you'll know **a truth that frees**. Verse 32, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." So the world tells you - the problem is outside you but the answer is inside. But Jesus says, no, the problem is inside, and the solution is outside.

In other words, to enter into the freedom, the life God has for you, you need a truth external to you, to come and shine in your heart, and show you God as he really is, and you as you really are; and why you do what you do, and the pride, or the anger, or the need for approval from others that drives it. And as truth shines in, chains can begin to break. But they'll never break all the time it's 'you be you'

I've told you this before, but shortly after I became a Christian I started going to a church that sang Charles Wesley's hymns, and I had never heard anything like it. But one stood out, because it has that verse: 'Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night, thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee.'

And when I sung that for the first time I thought - and still think - that's me! I was that prisoner, I was chained, and I couldn't stop my sin, in my own strength I still can't stop it, and the swearing was the least of it - but in your grace and love you shone the light of your truth - the truth about You, and the truth about me - into my heart, into my prison cell, and you've set me free.

But when Jesus talks about truth, he's not talking about some abstract truth, is he, like 'here are 6 facts about human nature to help you live a better life'? No, get to John 14, and Jesus says, "*I am the way*, *and the truth*, and the life." And if every other religious leader wants to give yo a to-do list, and only Jesus offers you rest, then every other religious leader claims to be a teacher of truth, but only Jesus claims to *be* the truth.

So thirdly, true freedom comes from **knowing him**. Verse 36, "So if the Son set you free, you will be free indeed." A slave has no right of inheritance, but what if the Son who does sets that slave free, by paying the slave price for him. And what if the Father didn't just agree to free him but made him a joint heir with his Son?

If you're not yet a Christian, that is what Jesus is saying he will do for you. And if you are a Christian, it's what he's already done for you.

You see, the people he's talking to are putting their trust in their ethnic background: v33 again, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone." Literally, we're Abraham's *seed*. We're the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that through his seed the world will be blessed. And Jesus is saying, 'no, you're slaves, but I am that Seed, the One True Son come to set you free.'

And how does he do it? By dying the death of a sinner and a slave. Crucifixion was considered so terrible that under Roman law it was illegal to crucify a free man. Only slaves could be crucified. And for the Jews, to be hung on a tree was to die accursed by God. And yet, at the cross Jesus, the only truly free man, died the death of a slave. The only sinless man died the accursed death of sinners.

Why? Because as the Son over the house, he took your sin, and my sin, that we might forever be free of it. He paid the slave price with his life. And rose again to break your chains.

True freedom does not come by pursuing total freedom and throwing off all the rules, or trying harder and following all the rules. It comes through Christ, who sets you free and makes you an heir.

As Paul writes to the Galatians, 'When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir.' (Gal 4:4–7).