

Defined Freedom (Galatians 5:13-25)

10:00am Holy Communion – 29th June 2025 (Grayswood)

Galatians 5:13-25

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

<Prayer>

What does it mean to be free? It may be more difficult to define than we think. We could answer by imagining a state of life where we are not – **where we do not have freedom**. Actually, do you think you are free – really free - or is this common culture of ours a pretence of freedom, but not actually so?

In socio-political terms we live in a **Western Liberal Democracy**. Quite apart from what you might do with the word *liberal* in terms of your political allegiance (and we can put that to one side for now), let's think of your freedom in terms of your *liberty*. For example:

- With *Economic Freedom* – You can operate, speculate, invest and be a consumer – all at once, and at will. Indeed, the economy is defined by you doing so.
- With *Freedom of Speech* – You can express yourself with a confidence that you will not be attacked for what you say, and with respect to how you react to others saying what they think.
- With *Freedom of Religion* – Well here we are. But you can freely choose not to, if you wish! Or indeed somewhere else by faith or creed.
- With *Freedom of Choice* – You may form and fashion yourself as the person you want to be, by education and profession.

These are all positively good things that we can embrace to live in freedom. But there are also a number of *subtractive* ways that freedom is understood. These are the preferred absence of certain constraint which we would *not* want for liberty – so we wish to feel *unrestricted*, *uncontrolled* and be *unconventional*, should we wish to do so. Western Liberal Democracy, at least in theory, requires a minimum of law and legislation – a small administrative government with a *lassiez-faire* attitude.

We know a non-interventional and non-coercive police force and a judiciary that protects our personal rights to security.

Free societies can have all these conditions, as well as individuals, with respect to the principle that our freedom should never be at the expense of someone else's. **Both have to coexist well because freedom is a risky business.** Freedom can go too far, freedom can be over-indulged, freedom can be abused.

<Galatians background – Freedom from the Law – Freedom from guaranteed failure answerable only by sacrifice>

‘For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

Paul is trying to qualify *freedom in behaviour* as a way to live well together according to the pattern of Christ, *rather than* the former, burgeoning codes of rules and laws they had previously. **For the human condition, freedom is more acceptable than rules. However, the lived experience of freedom is not without its great potential for unchecked desire.** You see, there is always the danger of holding the description of freedom as ‘*the power and scope to act as one pleases.*’ But that is a *malfunction* of freedom because we are not a series of independent *ones*.

Freedom is best tested together, because *we shall need to feel how others treat us*. This is why general liberty should seek to build a culture of cooperation and mutual respect, which settles into a self-regulating level of *reasonableness*. Paul puts it into a quite vivid language of the sort that we would not use today but would

have been clear in his time: ‘[through love become slaves to one another.](#)’ Freedom here is qualified by love, which keeps it according to *relationships* rather than the *individual self*. **So, a free society must have certain edges of acceptable behaviour, to which individuals truly consent.**

The open-ended scope of freedom will sometimes take us into ethical consideration - where difficult matters require sensitive thinking and freedoms may have to be controlled.

Consider the topical matter of assisted dying – current and very controversial. In other times it has been the deregulation of gambling, or being a Conscientious Objector to military service, or the call for legalisation of recreation drugs. I’m sure you could think of many other such subjects. Ethical discussion will need some input to freedom of what we understand as *values or virtues*. **That is where, in history, Western Liberal Democracy and the Christian Faith have been present together – and it is vital that they remain so.** But it does not always work out like that. Wild self-interest will always break out! The risks of freedom we know - abuse, exploitation and crime.

Paul collects up his own set of goodies and baddies, by way of possible behaviours:

[Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.](#)

Also possible, are somewhat better behaviours:

[By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.](#)

Two things link these lists. **The first is that freedom allows them all.** You have liberty to both fornicate and be faithful – **freedom will not judge you.** The second is the need for guidance between the two, and this has to come from somewhere. Thankfully it does. “*For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.*”. We know Paul is referring to God’s Holy Spirit which works in our conscience to bring some self-control over our natural self-interest. **But this is more than a code of conduct to replace one set of controlling laws with another.** The avoidance of all which is bad, towards all which is good, is a transforming change of our *very nature*, **so that we live for and like Christ.** *But it comes at a cost*, and it is Christ who paid for it in his body: ‘*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.*’

<Pause>

I make it sound simple – just live by the spirit! You have freedom to do so, and we have a great example in Christ. Yes, individually, we can strive for that. Indeed, a definition for the whole of Earthly life is that we strive to be more like Christ – you know the wonderful words, also from St Paul: ‘*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*’ **But society together has found it more difficult to be transformed according to the perfect mutual goodness of the Holy Trinity. We have had to learn together, often getting it wrong.** Cooperation in our Western Liberal Democracy is dreadful at the moment. **The need for virtues and values ever greater.**

Our society has never been secular and is not secular now. **That would be a disaster.** The sinews of the Christian faith are interlaced within us to the extent that it is the assumed definition of things. The complex mix of freedom is held in settled tension because a standard of human behaviour is felt to be good for us all. If we do not have the example of Christ as to how live together, then society just makes it up for itself and then look what happens: *self as the only measure.*

<pause>

Two weeks ago, was Trinity Sunday – the definition of God – such perfect togetherness it seems like one, as we proclaim in the creeds. Last Sunday, by very great contrast, the gospel reading was an example of gross humanity in a dreadful form – *Legion*, a single man possessed by many demons – a frightful and conflicted version of humanity. This week is the organism of society, which is just as able to be possessed, yet can seek to be like God also, as the wonderful community of Holy Trinity. These weeks work together because, as the gospels tell, the perfection of God came into the human condition and showed it *could be lived on Earth* by good example – *Christ was flesh, he lived amongst us.* This is why a *good freedom is possible for us in God's image*, according to his virtues, both as individuals and as society. For us in **Western Liberal Democracy**, we have never found a better way, and I doubt we ever shall.

Amen