

**Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 (Luke 9: 51-62) – *Wrestling with Freedom***  
**Preached on Sunday 30/06/2019**  
**8.00 & 11.00 at Christ Church; 9.30 at Good Shepherd**

St Augustine of Hippo is reckoned as amongst the first and greatest scholars of the Western church, and as such gets a lot of the blame for things people don't like about Christianity today. Two lines from his prayers remain quite well known. The first we use in one of the collects: 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.' The second is more personal: 'God, make me celibate, but not yet.' (That's not one of our collects!) I've been reading quite a lengthy biography of Augustine, and it's struck me that for him the two prayers are closely related. His was a restless faith, always seeking towards perfection yet hugely conscious of how far short he fell. In his day celibacy was highly prized as a religious and moral ideal, and Augustine shared that view, but, as the biographer put it, he did really enjoy sex! What was fascinating in the biography – based in his own so-called 'Confessions' – was how he wrestled with himself in renouncing career, social status and the possibility of marriage; and how this represented for him the exercise of the freedom he knew in Christ. One thing you can't accuse him of is complacency: he always strove to be a truer Christian.

You sense something of that same wrestling in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Today's passage picks up the theme of freedom that we explored last week: 'It was for freedom that Christ has set us free.' But then he wrestles with what freedom means: free from the restrictions of the law of Moses, but not licence to behave just anyhow.

Today some people see Christianity as a list of 'thou shalt nots' – and we say, 'No, it's about freedom' – but we still prize the moral code that our faith gives us. Sometimes this means moral dilemmas and disagreements – and a need to wrestle over doing what is right. Freedom is being free to follow your conscience – but be wary of doing so in isolation (we fool ourselves very easily). Listen to other people, especially in the Christian community, and be informed by Scripture. Paul identifies a deeper struggle between the sinful nature and the spiritual nature in each of us. He laments that despite our best intentions we get things horribly wrong and end up doing exactly what we do not want to do, because sin still has its hold. In Christ we have been freed from slavery to sin – so be vigilant, he says: we would be very foolish to allow the sinful nature to take control again.

Paul highlights a list of obviously sinful acts that show up the bad side of human nature. They are all destructive behaviours that can operate either suddenly and cataclysmically, or slowly and insidiously. Take his example of drunkenness: as Christians we have freedom to enjoy a drink, to go to the pub, to celebrate the good things of God's creation (always respecting those who use their freedom not to drink alcohol). However, freedom can be abused. A single cataclysmic decision to drive home when under the influence: the consequences can be dreadful. More insidiously, alcohol can slowly but relentlessly take a grip on your being: the addiction that means you can't do without; the destruction of your own life and the lives of your family and all around. When Paul says 'don't let sin take a hold' that's the sort of destruction he may have in mind. Sin destroys freedom: don't give it a chance.

So that's the sinful side of human nature. But there is also a spiritual side, and the good news is we have a boost available from no less a force than the Holy Spirit himself – that's God within us. God the Holy Spirit is always looking to change and renew us from the inside out so that we should not be locked in by sin but released by the Spirit freely to live, work, worship, share and delight in the world God has given us and the calling God has for each one of us. God is continually developing the character of his followers, growing in them the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

How the Spirit works is different for each one of us and different at different stages in our lives. I can remember my first attempt at Christian youth-work, helping with a camp in the Lake District: the group of youngsters I was looking after had really got under my skin and I could happily have given up and gone home. I can remember quite distinctly, when at my lowest ebb, receiving an inner gift of faith to keep going – knowing it would be all right – and later on (on the last night) a gift of joy actually to enjoy their company!

Seeing change in character in yourself is tricky. (If you're like me you're more likely to despair of yourself.) But you may notice it in others close to you. Sometimes this happens after people have come through traumatic events, perhaps bereavements. Awful as it is at the time, you do see people growing and developing – perhaps more patient, perhaps more gentle – as they come to a place of acceptance.

I do believe this comes through openness to the Holy Spirit. (An opposite reaction of bitterness is also possible.) Through the Spirit we have freedom to discover the best of our spiritual nature.

The Holy Spirit works to help us become the people God would have us be. The Spirit does not provide an easy escape path. It does often feel like a wrestling match within ourselves. But the outcome that God longs for is that we enjoy lives that are truly free. True freedom is the freedom to love. Here's a final quote from Augustine. Augustine said, 'Love God and do as you like' – what could be more freeing than that? If you truly love God then you will only want to do what God wants: that will be your greatest desire. What does God want? Paul quoted Jesus who quoted Leviticus: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Do that and you have fulfilled all those law's requirements. That's how you cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, not by looking inwards. Look outwards in love of neighbour. Look upwards in love of God. Listen to the cry of the world. Listen to the call of God. Of course, we do still have to struggle, but in the end, our wrestling and our restlessness will be stilled by God's gifts of freedom and peace.