

The Fruit of the Spirit

II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Some eighteen or so years ago, after a long hot day studying with colleagues on our doctoral programme at Princeton, we decided to go to the nearby air-conditioned cinema. My American friends were thrilled that it was going to be a Scottish film. "It's Braveheart! It'll make you feel homesick."

Well, they were half right.

'Braveheart' was what Robert the Bruce was called, and of course, William Wallace was not a diminutive Australian.

Most people remember from the film the battle cry of 'freedom!' Whether it was ever uttered or not is unknown, but the concept of freedom found its way into the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath where King Robert, and the leadership of Scotland, wrote to Pope John XXII with their appeal for Scotland's freedom.

"As long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours, that we are fighting, but for freedom - for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself"

Freedom: the power or right to think, speak or act as one wants. It is not only a political aspiration, deployed by nationalists of every hue, but a concept that we associate with prisoners of conscience, the suffragist movement of the early C20th demanding for votes women, the ability of the press to speak up and speak out, and for activists across the world to stand up for any minority oppressed because of their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or political view.

Freedom is a Bible idea. It is at the heart of Israel's exodus story when Hebrew slaves sought freedom from Egyptian slavery. It is at the heart of the Israelite exile story where the Jewish people were carried off into Babylonian captivity after the defeat of their nation and the destruction of their Temple. The prophet Elisha, picking up the mantle of Elijah, found the courage and freedom to speak out and help God's children see more clearly what it was that God wanted of them and to realise that with their freedom also came responsibility.

We find the challenge of freedom in the New Testament. In His Nazareth manifesto, Jesus preaches about proclaiming release or freedom to the captives, and liberty for the oppressed. But it is Paul in his letters who really runs with the idea of freedom.

“You were called to freedom...”, Paul writes. Called to be free from all the things that weigh us down and hold us back and trip us up. Free to become released from the burden by sin and guilt and fear and pain and even the reality of death.

This freedom brings responsibility, and freedom recalls us to respond to the relationship we are meant to have with God. Freedom is rarely absolute. It is always circumscribed by responsibility: by the laws that protect and guide; by the duties that nurture and sustain. Christian freedom is not unrestrained permission to do whatever you want. Freedom is faith working through love. Freedom to love and serve in the way that Jesus did is God’s intention for humanity. “Freedom is a gift from God given through faith. Like all good gifts, though, it can be misused and even cause harm. Paul knows that people misuse their freedom to dominate others...people who love and serve can be taken advantage of and abused.”ⁱ

The gift of freedom will often, not always, but often be followed by the gift of choice. There is nearly always a choice to be made in life and the way we choose to live it. “Often we cannot choose what happens to us, but we can always choose how to react.”ⁱⁱ

When Paul writes about our freedom in Jesus, it is to be free in the Spirit of God to pick up and deploy the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, to choose what kind of Christian we are going to be, what kind of person we are going to be.

The fruit of the Spirit. My earliest Christian ministry experience, a few years before I was ordained was in a Summer Mission team on the east beach of North Berwick, just in front of the sea paddling pool. One of the choruses we taught the children, I’ll spare you the singing of it, was, “For the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, ‘gainst such there is no law.”

Our freedom in Jesus comes from the choices we make about the kind of Christian, the kind of person we are going to be. Paul gives us the choices, and they are not mutually exclusive.

Do you choose Love, to be a loving person? A person whose way of looking at others in the world is framed by seeing those people, this world, at their best, despite all the brokenness? To look at your neighbour, the people around you, and to treat them with love.

Do you choose Joy, to be a joyful person? A person whose way of looking at life isn't unrealistic or superficial but genuinely sees and celebrates the pleasure and the positivity that life, despite everything, still brings.

Do you choose Peace, to be a peaceful person? A person who knows that contentment is not apathy or avoidance, and that seeks to bring the experience of harmony not only into their own lives but the lives of those around.

Do you choose Patience, to be a patient person? A person who works away steadily and diligently, not only seeing the grand vision in the distance, but the small details that, like footsteps, pave the pathway into the future.

Do you choose Kindness, to be a kind person? During lockdown I remember there was a saying that did the rounds that went, "In a world where you can be anything, be kind." A person who sees gently the failings and foibles of the people around them, not glossing over or ignoring them but not judging them too harshly, and offering a road to mercy and forgiveness.

Do you choose Goodness, to be a good person? Someone whose thoughts, words and actions show the best that they can be, and by osmosis or example, brings out goodness in others. Are you the kind of person who makes goodness attractive?

Do you choose Faithfulness, to be a faithful person? Someone who is loyal, trustworthy, and committed. Who knows that it's far too easy to give up, and knows that if anything is going to be achieved, it requires application and stickability.

Do you choose Gentleness, to be a gentle person? Don't confuse gentleness with softness. Some of the gentlest people I know are some of the toughest people I know, for they are the people who don't give up on others but with that resilient gentleness work, and work, and work away until a person, a situation, a great evil is transformed into something so much better.

Do you choose Self-control, to be a self-controlled person? The kind of person who knows when to speak, and when to be silent. When to act decisively, or to wait a little longer.

The gift of freedom encourages us as Christians to choose which of the different fruit of the Spirit to use in our lives at different times and in different places and for different reasons. So that we, yes even you, even me, can embody, exude, the human possibility of a lived-out Christian life. Your God-given freedom makes possible your choosing, your deciding, and your putting into practice.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. You choose. You believe. You live.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Robert A Bryant, Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 3 p187

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Sacks, Morality, p209