

Proper 8, Ordinary 13A
Free to Need
Romans 6.12-23 | Matthew 10.40-42

Sharing in small groups on one or more of the following:

How would you describe to an alien visitor what the word 'freedom' means? What examples would you give?

Tell about a time when you gave help to someone in need.

Tell about a time when you needed someone to help you.

Do you prefer to be a guest in someone's home, or host others in yours? Why?

Imagine being a spy, a member of a resistance group during a time of war or occupation. You have to travel from place to place, following instructions to safe addresses where you'll be looked after by sympathisers. You have to get messages out to your network without them falling into the wrong hands. You need people you've never met before to hide you, feed you, give you a place to stay, or to transport you to your next destination – all at great risk to themselves.

This picture of receiving help in pursuing a dangerous and secret mission is possibly closer to the earliest Christian experience, and to what it feels like to be Christian in some parts of our world even today, than we can really imagine. Our centuries of Christian civilisation can make us forgetful of the fact that Jesus himself, and the apostles that followed him relied on other people to support them, feed them, sometimes hide them, take care of their injuries, and get them from place to place in spreading the gospel message. And this forgetfulness sometimes makes us hear readings from the Gospel the wrong way round.

Take today's short reading, for example. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me...and [no-one] who gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...will lose their reward." It is easy to hear this as a reminder to *offer* hospitality. When people are in need, give what you can – even as small a thing as a cup of water. And when we welcome others, we are welcoming Christ.

That's not wrong as far as it goes, it's just not what the passage says. This is a teaching about the reward that will come to those who *help us out*, as disciples who have lost everything to follow Jesus.

Likewise, when we think about Jesus getting in trouble with the Pharisees for dining with tax collectors and sinners, we tend to think of Jesus as the host, inviting dodgy people to his table. And so we take from this that we need to make our table open to all, to create welcome for those on the margins. There's plenty in the Gospels to support this practice of radical hospitality.

But let's also remember that, actually, Jesus got into trouble for *being welcomed into* the houses of the tax collectors and sinners. It wasn't against ritual law to give food to people in need *but it was against Jewish law to go and eat the food* of "unclean" people and to sit among the kinds of people who were also invited to those tables. It's the invitations Jesus accepted rather than the ones he gave out that bothered the Pharisees.

We turn these passages inside out in our heads because we are so accustomed as Christians to being the ones who give help and offer hospitality rather than the ones who receive it. I wonder if that means we have missed out on a lot. Because in Jesus' upside-down kingdom, those who are called blessed tend to be those who need someone else to look out for them.

Our society values autonomy more than almost anything, and we often get it confused with freedom. Autonomy is when you're the author of your own life, you get to decide what to do and when to do it, and nobody can order you around. Autonomy requires that we keep a bit of a buffer or distance between us and other people, because claims of love and connection can feel like threats to our independence. Love might tie us down or bind us to places or commitments that we're not then free to walk away from.

But the most supremely free person who ever walked this earth was Jesus, and he bound himself to his friends and to the whole human race to the point where he was tortured and killed for love of us. Freedom is actually the freedom to *choose* our commitments without being bullied, manipulated or forced into them, and to *choose* to suffer for the sake of love for another.

Today's reading from St Paul sets this out quite clearly. None of us is free in the sense of being autonomous. The way sin works inside us and in our world means that we're always being influenced one way or another – pushed around by our own inner impulses and reactions or the behaviour of other people. Unless we continually give ourselves to God, and seek God's way in prayer, then we will inevitably be captive to our blind spots and led astray.

But we can be free, in God's Spirit, to choose the good even when it seems counter-intuitive.

One way we can express that freedom is by willingly receiving help and kindness from other people even when the weakness of that position scares us and threatens our secure sense of ourselves as "better than that."

The saints who embraced voluntary poverty glimpsed this astonishing truth - that to be open about our need and then be given a cup of water for our thirst opens a doorway to grace that no amount of giving charity or hospitality to others can open.

I find this an exceptionally difficult spiritual reality to live into, but I know that the times when I've asked for help, whether that's for financial support, or for someone else to pick up a task I can't do, or to share an emotional burden – these have been opportunities to discover more of the love of God. These moments shape in the depths of my heart a belief that the world is held in love and generosity in a way that no amount of praying and giving can achieve.

We don't talk often in the church any more about the sin of pride. But that's what's at play when we struggle to receive from others. Even if we don't think we're all that great at lots of things, there's still a part of us that still wants to be self-reliant, and we will suffer in silence to prevent anyone else knowing that there is need or pain in our lives.

But what does that say about how we view the people we help – with our money, time or hospitality? That we're prepared to help them, but not *be like them*?

It's hard to give respectfully to others unless we know something of what it feels like to be vulnerable to the kindness of strangers. How can we know what it looks like to offer genuine dignity and welcome for others when we refuse to rely on other people for any of our own needs?

True human relationships, and true blessedness, are grounded in vulnerability. And vulnerability asks us to give up on our illusions of autonomy, and acknowledge the needs we have that only other people can meet.

This gift of vulnerability creates a blessing, not a burden, for those who give to us. Because when we receive, we open a channel for the flow of grace that Jesus describes as not only welcoming him, but “the one who sent him,” the Love at the heart of creation. And this, indeed, is an eternal reward.