



Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 13 August 2023

READINGS

Genesis 37:1-4,12-28; Psalm 105:1-6,16-22; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

The phenomenon of slavery

Today I will focus on the OT reading, which is the story of Jacob being sold into slavery. What I wish to do is spend a little time looking at the phenomenon of slavery. You might think this is a heady topic in the context of a sermon, but ultimately, I hope to relate it to our individual relationships with Christ.

So the first thing we have to bear in mind is that the world of the New Testament, the world out of which the New Testament emerges, is one absolutely saturated in the language and thought of slavery. This perhaps applies a little less to the immediate context of Jesus, but is definitely applicable to the worldview of Paul and the rest of the New Testament. So to this end, it is helpful to gain an understanding of the Greco-Roman mindset or worldview, because this is largely the world-view of the New Testament. The NT in its entirety is written in Greek. Paul is a citizen of the Roman empire. Jesus is executed under Roman law and jurisdiction.

Essentially all menial labour, from agricultural work, to building projects, is carried out by slaves. Furthermore, for a very large portion of the population it was entirely conceivable that one could fall into slavery through debt. So it may be helpful to bear in mind, that the material world, from the buildings Roman citizens lived in to the food they ate, was made and produced by slaves. By contrast Roman citizens enjoyed a wide variety of rights and protections under Rome law, which is why in Acts, Paul appeals to the Roman tribune on the basis of his Roman citizenship. As a prerequisite to Roman citizenship, one had to own land. The phenomenon of latifundia – large Roman estates worked by slaves or day labourers is a staple of Jesus' parables. Slaves, by contrast, did not and could never own land, or private property of any nature, they indeed were the property of their owners and masters.

And possibly this understanding of work and menial labour, which we have inherited from the Greeks and Romans, still plagues us today, where though anyone who is legally employed is guaranteed certain rights by the state, the idea of certain types of work being regarded as demeaning is still prevalent. So there is the aspect in which this thinking permeates work of a legal nature. Then of course there is the very real phenomenon of human trafficking which seems to be on the rise. There are estimates of between 600 000 and 800 000 people trafficked every year.

But the story of Joseph brings a unique, personal, almost existential aspect to this whole notion of slavery. What does it mean to be sold into slavery, having previously enjoyed the rights of a free person? This is something of an archetypal motif or narrative trajectory, appearing in famous and Oscar-winning films

like *Gladiator*, where the general Maximus, played by Russel Crowe, is ordered to be executed by the emperor's son. He escapes but falls into the hands of slave traders. Or the biopic of Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*. Chiwetel Ejiofor plays a free man, an accomplished carpenter and violinist, living in New York where slavery is outlawed and is tricked by circus owners and sold into slavery in the antebellum South.

Perhaps what makes such accounts all the more inspiring is the trajectory of these characters once assuming the status of slaves experiencing, in the case of Joseph and Maximus, meteoric rises. Joseph regains his freedom, as does Solomon Northup. Maximus is killed, though not before exacting revenge on the emperor's son, Commodus. But all of this at what cost? How many years were lost? Northup's actual memoirs detail hardship and abuse at the hands of his various masters through the course of his twelve years' bondage. And although Joseph is ultimately reconciled with his family, he is essentially estranged and forgotten by them for a period of thirteen years.

As people accustomed to or conditioned by modern western values – democracy is western construct (many African theorist have questioned the validity of democratic models for African contexts) – nevertheless, as people conditioned by western, democratic values of “liberty, equality and fraternity”, by the notion of inalienable human rights, freedom, in all its forms – freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom to seek the type of employment one chooses, freedom is something we take very seriously.

We therefore naturally find it very difficult to surrender our freedom – to submit our will, our desires, preferences etc. to that of another. And yet, I wonder if this is not what is asked of us as Christians. Not that we submit ourselves, and surrender our rights to any human institution, but to Christ. Paul's letters – Paul being utterly emersed in the ideology of the Roman empire – are permeated with the language of slavery.

This is behind the famous analogy made in Romans 6. Frequently too he refers to himself as “slave of Christ” (*doulos tou Christou*). On other occasions Paul plays down the status of actual slaves. Such texts have been used not least in the antebellum South to justify slavery.

For two reasons Paul played down this distinction. Firstly, Paul was convinced of an imminent Parousia, i.e. an imminent return of Christ. This in fact informed much of his pastoral advice, such as that to the unmarried not to seek marriage. In light of Christ's supposed imminent return, none of these distinctions mattered. At a deeper level though, and perhaps for us today, our freedom is found paradoxically in slavery. Slavery, is strangely something all of us must experience. In the words of famous singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, one way or another, we're all “gonna have to serve somebody.”