

Called to Freedom

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Introduction

This course is written for first use in 2015 – a year in which the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta is remembered, and in which no doubt countless other anniversaries, national and personal, great and small, will be remembered.

The spirit of Magna Carta has acted as a model for defining laws and constitutions that seek to assure freedom from abuse of power.

Other anniversaries, such as the continuing commemorations of events during WW1, act as reminders of times when societal freedom has been so compromised by the actions of some that conflict has ensued.

In preparing the sessions of this course book I have had in mind the two key words ‘Remember’ and ‘Freedom’ that are rooted in those anniversaries.

I have been conscious that my own faith journey has been significantly shaped by traditions that ‘remember’, as for example in the pattern of the liturgical year and of commemorating saints’ days as well as in the focal remembrance of the Eucharist.

I have been brought up within Anglican tradition and have been blessed with sharing that journey within other traditions during my years of ordained ministry: particularly often within the Methodist and Roman Catholic traditions, but with many others as well.

I hope that those who engage with this course will find that my own reflections within the material collated here provide a source of stimulating thought and reflection – I would not expect complete agreement 😊

The sequence of the sessions in this course is deliberately designed to echo something of the shape of salvation history from Creation through Exodus, Exile and Reconciliation to Eucharist, Vocation and Pentecost.

The resources of scripture, hymnody, art, songs and notes in each session are designed to be rather like a ‘base camp’ for your journey, whether you follow the sessions as an individual or in a group. Take what you need, journey freely, and remember to pray as you go.

Revd Colin Alsbury

January 2015

Sessions

Sabbath

– Remembering **Creation**

Exodus and **Exile**

– Remembering Lost Freedom

Forgiving, Forgetting & **Reconciliation**

– Freedom & Grace

Passover / **Eucharist**

– “Remember Me”

Called to be Saints

– **Vocation** and our Call to Holiness

Pentecost and Freedom in the Spirit

– Christian Diversity: Freedom or Exile?

Stumbling Blocks



At a number of points an issue that has been the cause of division amongst Christians of different traditions is highlighted by a sign like the one shown here.

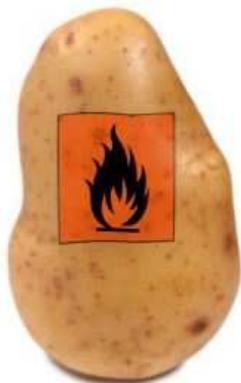
It is important to recognise that what has been a stumbling block for some may have been a stepping stone for others – if discussion enters into such territory it should be gracious and without judgement.

Stumbling block or a stepping stone?



Images from <http://internetcafedevoations.com/2013/04/an-unlikely-stumbling-block/> and <http://charmsalonaurora.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/stepping-stones.jpg>

Hot Potatoes



In the course of editing and final revision we realised that at a couple of points in the text or in quotes the content might be a particular focus for debate. Groups do not need to address them, but we think that if they do they might need a whole session on that point alone!

Reflections

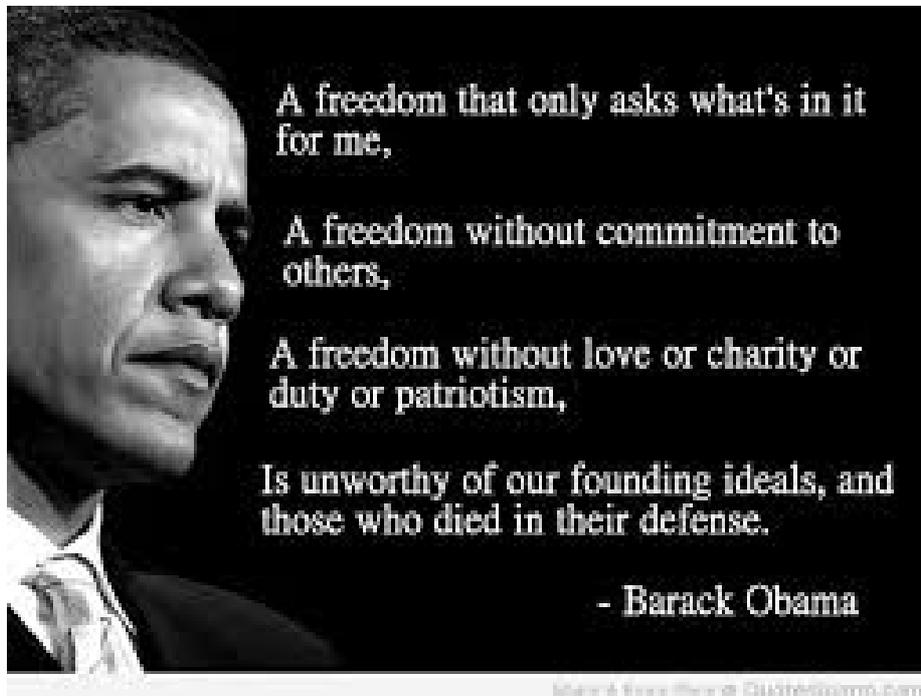
In parallel with the material for the study group sessions there follow a simple series of pages with words and images designed for use within a time of individual quiet reflection, but which could also be used as starter points for group discussion.

The Reflections are numbered in sequence to match the group sessions with the addition of 'A Freedom Reflection' – an extra Reflection for use in advance of, or as a follow up to, the main course.

Each of the main sequence of reflections begins with an invitation to think, recall, consider or remember: this might be a time of shared quiet personal space – alternatively, a group might decide to invite sharing. It is probably wise for a group to decide which approach to take and stick to it throughout the course.

A Freedom Reflection

'For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'' [Galatians 5:13-14]



Original image from <http://www.quotesdump.com/inspirational-quotes-why-is-freedom-important-quotes-by-barack-obama/>; inverted and edited image by Colin Alsbury

Reflection 1

Creation & Sabbath: 'It is finished'

Think about the ideas and experiences that have shaped your understanding of Sabbath...

"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." [Genesis 2.1-3]

"Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace."



"O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!"

Go before us, Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favour,
And further us with your continual help;
That in all our works begun, continued and ended in you,
We may glorify your holy name.

Artwork by Tim Bott from <http://www.conversationstarterswithgod.com>

Reflection 2

From Slavery to Freedom

Think about the events in life that have left you feeling truly free.



“We thank you, almighty God,
for the gift of water to sustain,
refresh and cleanse all life.

Over water
the Holy Spirit moved in the
beginning of creation.

Through water
you led the children of Israel
from slavery in Egypt
to freedom in the Promised Land.

In water
your Son Jesus received the
baptism of John and was anointed
by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah,
the Christ, to lead us from the death
of sin to newness of life.”

[Extract from Church of England (Common Worship) Prayer used over the water at Baptism]

“With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.”

Image from The Baptism Cube,

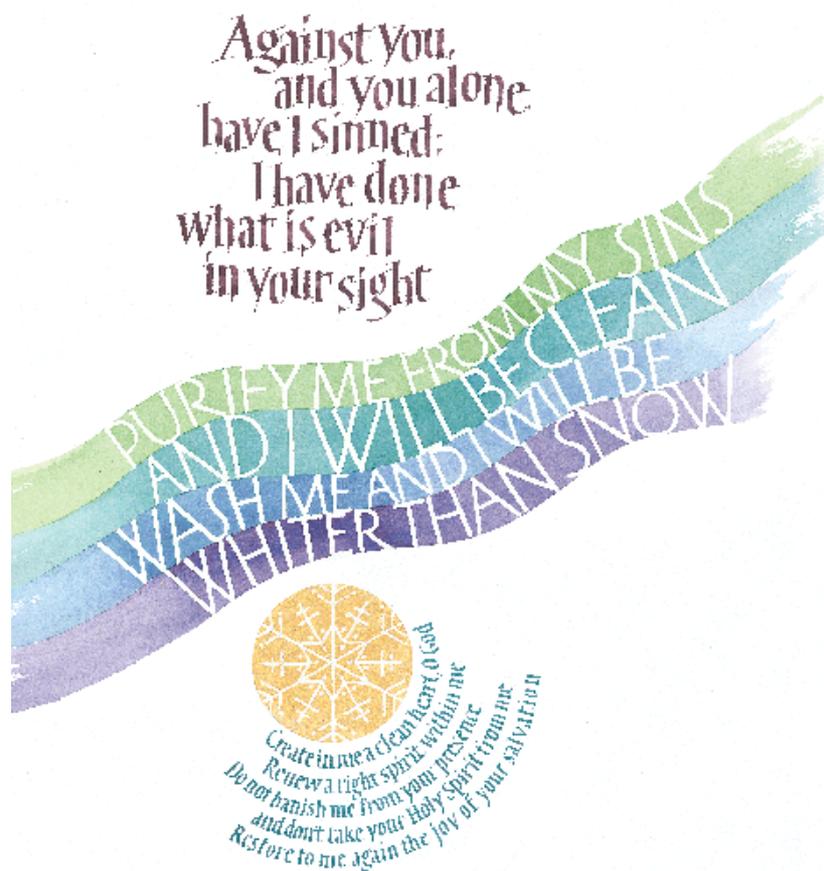
published by Church House January 2006: ISBN 9780715143209

Reflection 3

Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Think about a 'sorry' that you wish you had said.

*"O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work."* [Psalm 95.7b-9]



“Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.”

Artwork by Tim Bott from <http://www.conversationstarterswithgod.com> [Psalm 51.4, 7, 10-12]

Reflection 4

Eucharist: 'Do this in remembrance of me'

Recall an act of worship where you felt the real presence of Christ.

"When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' ... Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" [Luke 23.14-20]

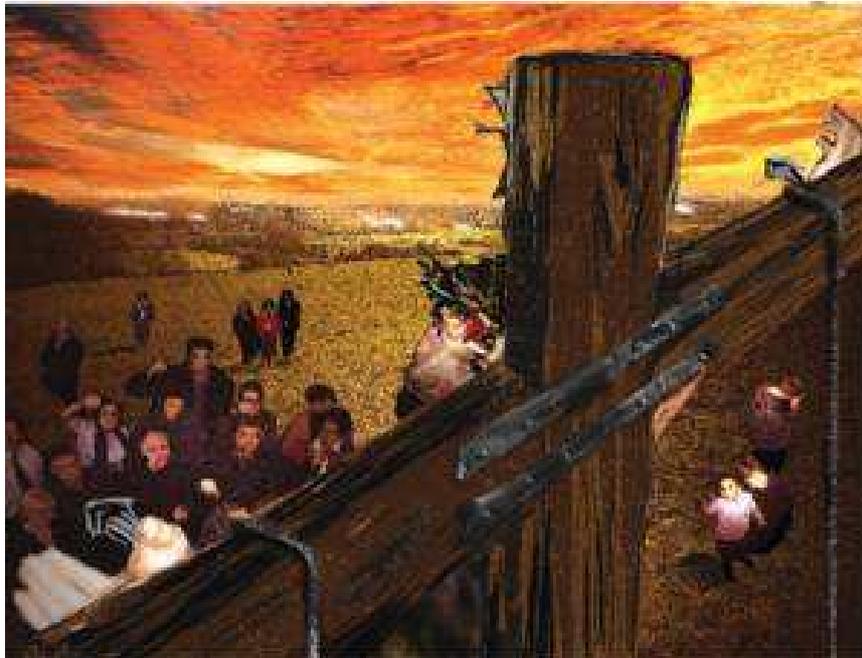


Image 'It is finished' by Aidan Meller from Eden.co.uk

Broken for me, broken for you, the body of Jesus broken for you.

He offered His body, He poured out His soul,
Jesus was broken that we might be whole:

Come to My table and with Me dine,
eat of My bread and drink of My wine:

This is My body given for you, eat it remembering I died for you:

This is My blood I shed for you, for your forgiveness, making you new:

©1978 Sovereign Lifestyle Music

Reflection 5

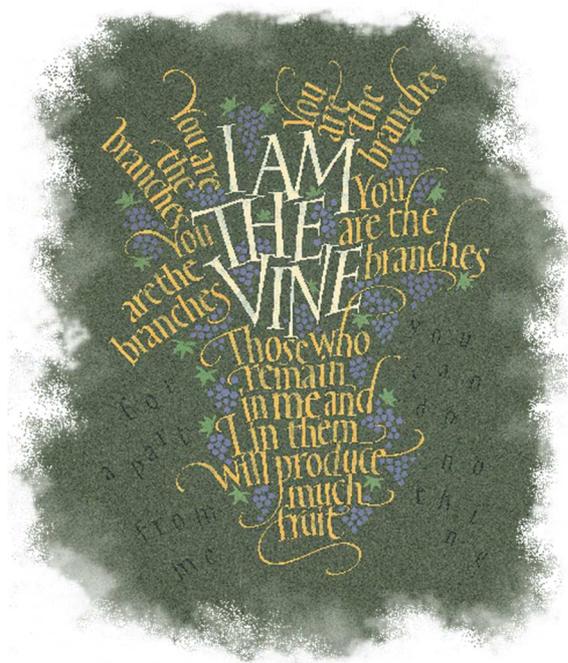
Vocation

Consider for a moment what sense of 'vocation' you have experienced.

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" [Isaiah 6.1-8]



*"In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow Thee."*

Artwork by Tim Bott from <http://www.conversationstarterswithgod.com> [John 15.5]

Reflection 6

Pentecost

Remember some of the freedoms that you enjoy...

“Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.’” [Luke 24.45-49]



Pentecost People

Come, Holy Spirit, and make us Pentecost people.
Let your wisdom and right judgment guide our decisions
and temper our impulses.
Let knowledge and understanding increase our capacity for
empathy and compassion.
Let reverence and awe fill us with gratitude and respect for
all of creation.
Give us the courage to witness boldly to our faith in word
and deed.
Through and with and in Jesus Christ, we pray.
Amen.

“Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm”

Group sessions and the Core material

Some groups or individuals may choose to read all the core material that follows in preparation for group sessions. Others may prefer to use the preceding 'reflections' as their main shared material and leave the core material as a resource for the facilitator or leader of group sessions.

Each group must decide for itself whatever approach suits best for its own members.

In my experience of groups it feels more comfortable if some 'ground rules' are agreed. In an ecumenical context I believe that the earlier note about 'stumbling blocks' is important – gracious listening and understanding has more often enriched faith journeys than attempts to define 'right' perspectives.

I have also found it often good to work on the basis that all group members should be clear about what can be said outside the group. One of the useful models that I have experienced is for it to be agreed that the areas of discussion may be shared but that this should be done in ways that do not directly or indirectly attribute who said what within the group.

For everyone's physical and spiritual comfort it is good to provide a comfortable and safe atmosphere – warm, hospitable and begun and ended punctually, with simple moments of prayer or reflection at beginning and end.

Scriptural References

I have always felt a certain unease when authors quote and lectionaries define beginnings and endings of readings. Rather often, in my experience, the verse before, or after, or the context or some other reason means that I want to read the whole passage, to see the bigger picture for myself. The list of scriptural references (page 56) is provided at least partly in the hope that some may turn to a Bible and look at the context of the passages I have referred to in the course: and, God willing, therein discover even more!

Session 1

Sabbath – Remembering Creation

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” [Exodus 20]

The words of the fourth commandment are the only ones that begin with the word ‘Remember’. The Hebrew word ‘zakar’ used here is the same as that used when God ‘remembers’ Noah and makes a covenant with him.



For some the concept of remembering Sabbath within Christian tradition has been about keeping Sunday as a special day, free from the ordinary labours of existence. The Keep Sunday Special campaign was especially active in relation to the Sunday Trading Act of 1994.

St Paul clearly envisages a new approach to Sabbath in Romans 14 and distances himself from pedantic observance when he writes: *“Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths”* [Colossians 2.16], but there remains a widespread sense extending well beyond the Christian community of the need to live life in a healthy balance of work and rest.

My own personal take on Sabbath sits light to association with any particular day of the week: for pedantically Saturday is the Sabbath.

Instead my take on Sabbath recalls the phrases in the first account of creation in Genesis 1 – *“And God saw that it was good”* (vv 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) – and sees Sabbath as a time for delight: time to see that God’s gifts are good.

I have a fondness also for the translation of Genesis into Old English by Aelfric in which Genesis 2.10 is rendered as *“God ða aplantode wynsumne orcerd...”* – God planted a winsome orchard – Aelfric’s use of the word ‘winsome’ invites us to recognise a profound sense of goodness and to delight in creation.



Awe and wonder are the response invited by the scale and diversity of all creation as it has continued to evolve through the millennia: though not all Christians are comfortable with the scientific narrative of how things came to be.

One of the more contemporary prayers used at Communion in the Episcopal Church (USA), expresses something of awe, wonder and delight in the fullness of creation in language that embraces the scientific endeavour:

“At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of ínterstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and thís fragile earth, our ísland home.” [Eucharistic Prayer C from the USA Episcopal Church]

As Delight, Awe and Wonder are aspects of Sabbath, time for Rest also features: Sabbath is a time for us to address our own realisation of St Augustine’s inner yearning expressed at the beginning of his Confessions:

“you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.” [St Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, 1.1.1]

A significant detail in the end of the first creation narrative in Genesis 2.1-3 may help us understand what such ‘Rest’ might be: One of the rabbis who contributes significantly to the Jewish website chabad.org reflects as follows:

“Rest is not movement, not toil, not creating; but what is it? Is it merely the negation of activity, or is rest itself an active pursuit? The Torah implies that it is indeed active. In the second chapter of Genesis we read that ‘God concluded, on the seventh day, the work that He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all the work that He had done.’

But if God rested on the seventh day, why does the verse say that He concluded His work on the seventh day? Our sages explain: on the seventh day God created the final and culminating element of His creation – element of rest.

‘What was the world lacking?’

Rest.

With the onset of Shabbat came rest.” [“What is Freedom?”, Yanki Tauber, www.chabad.org]

The writer continues, contrasting work and rest: *“Rest is an existent phenomenon, a creation, and not merely the absence of work. ‘Work’ is the movement from self outward, the projection of one’s creative powers to effect changes on one’s environment; ‘rest’ is the endeavour to focus inward, to withdraw to the quintessential core of one’s being.*

For six days God projected outward, creating a universe that is 'outside' and distinct of Himself. On the seventh day of creation He rested – He shifted His focus inward, drawing creation back into His omnipresent being.

Thus Shabbat is a 'holy' day, a day of heightened spiritual sensitivity; a day on which the created reality more deeply identifies with its supernal source. The same applies, on the human level, to our weekly implementation of the Divine cycle of creation in our own lives. Six days a week we project outward, developing and perfecting God's world.

On Shabbat, we actualize our partnership with God in creation by resting: by delving into the inner essence of our own souls and of the soul of creation.

So Shabbat is not a day of inactivity, but a day devoted to the activity of rest. A day in which we endeavour to seek our own spiritual centre, to better attune ourselves to the self that is one with the divine essence of all. True, the laws of Shabbat are replete with forbidden activities – in order to rest, one must cease to outwardly project; but the prohibition against work is only one aspect of the phenomenon of rest.”

[“What is Freedom?”, Yanki Tauber, www.chabad.org]

The commandment invites us not only to “*Remember the sabbath day*” but also to “*keep it holy*”. Canon 1247 of the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law describes the obligation of the faithful in this respect as follows: “*Moreover, they are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord’s day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body.*”

Worship, Joy and Relaxation are the key three aims affirmed in this Canon. If we join these with Delight, Awe and Wonder as above then we have a palette of dimensions to living Sabbath that can invigorate our ‘Rest’.

And alongside these we need to set our awareness of the times when Jesus sat light to the laws of Shabbat (as in Matthew 12.1-14 etc.): times that affirmed the need for nourishment and healing as having priority.

If we combine all these dimensions, then the commandment “*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy*” is readily seen not as a burden but an invitation to blessing...

A time for Nourishment and Healing...

A time for Delight, Awe and Wonder...

A time for Worship, Joy and Relaxation...

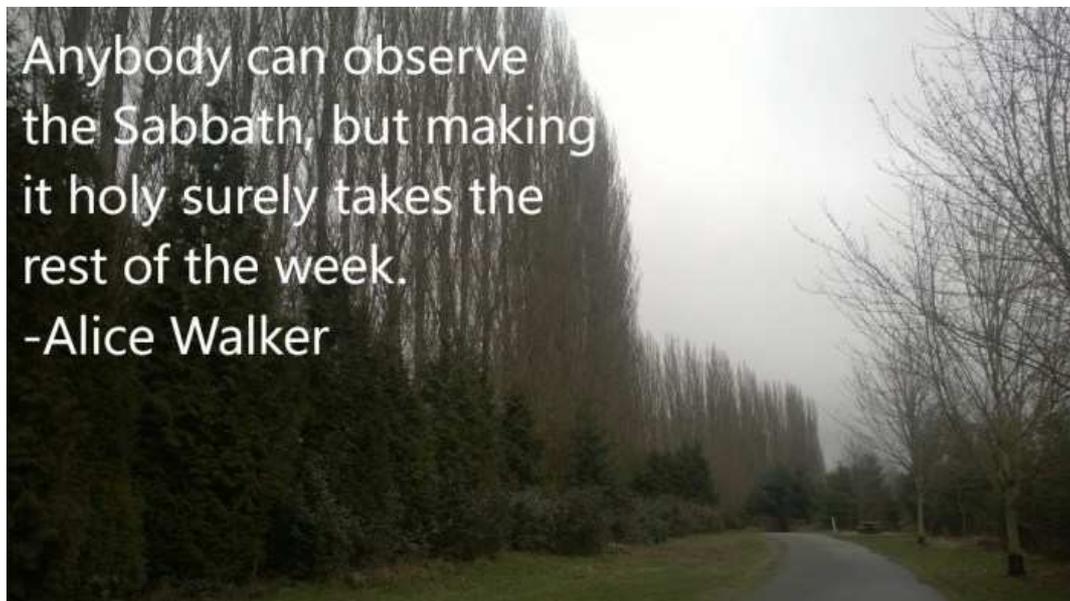


Image by Terri Stewart at <http://beguineagain.com/2014/05/24/sabbath-5> – words of Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, US novelist (1944 -), author of the Pulitzer Prize winning book The Color Purple.

Whenever we choose to keep Sabbath in our lives – which may not be Sundays (far too busy a day for so many Christians) – our keeping Sabbath as 'holy' in the sense of 'set apart' only makes sense if the rest of our week is different:

If Sabbath is a time for Nourishment – then the rest of our week might be about assuring or providing nourishment for others...

If Sabbath is a time for Healing – then the rest of our week might be about assuring or providing healing for others...

If Sabbath is about Delight – then within the rest of our week we might seek to enable others to know delight...

If Sabbath includes Awe and Wonder – then within the rest of our week we might be seeking to help others discover awe and wonder...

If Sabbath includes Worship – then within the rest of our week we might be seeking to open the hearts of others to the possibilities of worship...

If Sabbath includes Joy – then within the rest of our week we might look to bring joy to others...

If Sabbath includes Relaxation – then within the rest of our week we might strive to protect others' time that they might remember Sabbath...

And when we even begin to live our weeks in such a way, then our Sabbath time might come to resonate with that invited in Isaiah 58:

“Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”

Discussion point ideas:

What pressures and challenges make it difficult to find space to keep Sabbath within contemporary life?

What personal disciplines can help us make space for Sabbath in our lives?

Does the rest of our week sit in healthy balance with our Sabbath time?

Are there people close to us whom we can help make space for Sabbath in their lives?

Prayer: *(used at Friday night Kiddush as wine is blessed and shared)*

“And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day. The heavens and the earth were finished, the whole host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it because in it he had rested from all his work which God created and had done.”

Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine. (Amen)

Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who sanctifies us with his commandments, and has been pleased with us. You have lovingly and willingly given us Your holy shabbat as an inheritance, in memory of creation. The shabbat is the first among our holy days, and a remembrance of our exodus from Egypt. Indeed, You have chosen us and made us holy among all peoples and have willingly and lovingly given us Your holy shabbat for an inheritance. Blessed are You, who sanctifies the Shabbat. (Amen)

Session 2

Exodus and Exile –

Remembering Lost Freedom

The Exodus is the story of a people on a journey from slavery to freedom. In a sense their freedom began as the journey began, but the full measure of freedom was a long time coming.

Indeed, there were times on the journey when things were difficult and the people began to long for their old slavery as easier:

“The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’” [Exodus 16.2-3]

Centuries later in the time of Exile in Babylon the people again complained:

“By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.” [Psalm 137.1-6]

The book of Daniel reflects the struggle and tensions faced by a people of faith forced to live in exile in a strange land and the challenging choices that can bring when faiths and cultures are in conflict with each other.

The spirit of thankfulness to God for giving deliverance and triumph over adversity expressed in the song of Ananias, Azarias and Misael (otherwise Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego), the three young men thrown into the fiery furnace in Daniel 3, is known as the Benedicite and remains part of daily prayer in Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic tradition.

Sometimes in the darker moments of life it is hard to see paths of hope ahead and, rather as in the Song 'Hey Jude' we "Take a sad song and make it better". That song was written in June 1968, as Paul McCartney drove his Aston Martin to Weybridge to visit Cynthia Lennon and her son, Julian. On the journey he began thinking about their changing lives, and of the past times he had spent writing with Lennon at the Weybridge house:

"I thought, as a friend of the family, I would motor out to Weybridge and tell them that everything was all right: to try and cheer them up, basically, and see how they were. I had about an hour's drive. I would always turn the radio off and try and make up songs, just in case... I started singing: 'Hey Jules - don't make it bad, take a sad song, and make it better...' It was optimistic, a hopeful message for Julian: 'Come on, man, your parents got divorced. I know you're not happy, but you'll be OK.' I eventually changed 'Jules' to 'Jude'. One of the characters in Oklahoma is called Jud, and I like the name." [Paul McCartney, *Anthology*]

The vast range of spirituals that emanated from the years of African slavery and the subsequent struggle for civil rights in the Americas testify to the power of song in times of adversity. Song as an expression of grief, of faith, of hope.

"A spiritual is a song of the human spirit.

A spiritual is the voice of a slave expressing their own humanity through song.

A spiritual is the desire of the slave to connect to the power that created us all.

A spiritual is a cry for freedom. Pure. Raw. Unfiltered." [Calvin Earl]

One of the best known of the spirituals is 'Go Down Moses':

*"When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand, Let my People go.
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go"*

Based on Exodus 7.16, 8.1 the song identifies powerfully with experience of oppression in slavery and the Exodus.

Sadly there is still overt slavery in the modern world – and much hidden slavery – and there are many who live as exiles and refugees – sometimes for generations. There are also many who cannot see the subtler bondage into which they have sold their souls:

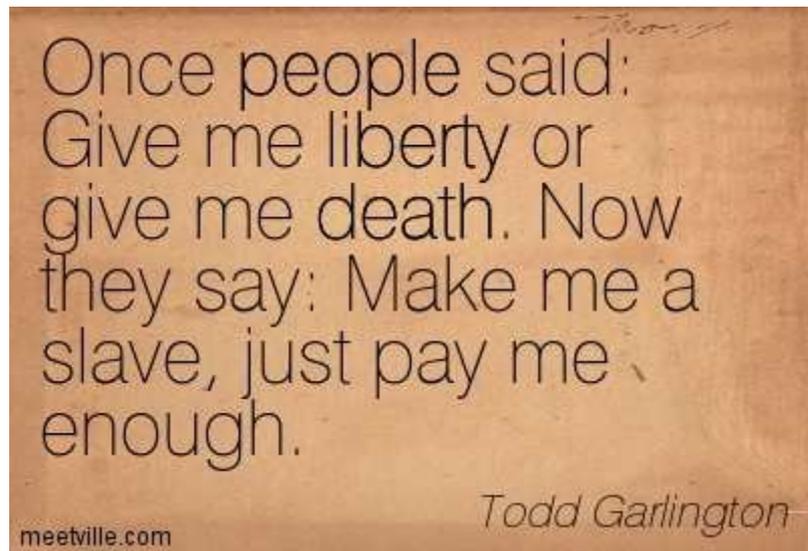


Image from <http://meetville.com/quotes/author/todd-garlington/page1>

Against this background it is good to recall the significance of the Passover and the Exodus:

“On the first night of Passover, we are commanded to relate the miracles and wonders that were performed for our forefathers in Egypt, as it is written, ‘Remember this day, on which you went out of Egypt’.

What is freedom? When pressed to define this most basic human need and aspiration, we usually find ourselves explaining what freedom is not. Freedom is not slavery, it is not confinement, it is not inhibition. But is that all there is to freedom – the absence of subjugation? Or is there a positive/dynamic aspect to the state of freedom?

Freedom is commonly perceived as the removal of all external constraints on a person's development and self-expression. Freedom is the natural state of man, this line of reasoning implies; free him of all outside forces that limit and inhibit him, and you have a free human being.

Passover embodies a far more ambitious freedom. The exodus from Egypt, which marked the end of Israel's subjugation to their Egyptian

enslavers, was but the first step of a seven-week journey, a forty-nine step climb in the conquest and transcendence of self that culminated in our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai on the festival of Shavuot. Nor does Shavuot represent the final realization of freedom: at Sinai, we were granted the potential and challenge to attain yet a deeper dimension of liberty and self-transcendence.

Thus Shavuot is the only festival that has no calendar date - the Torah designates it not as a certain day of a certain month (as it does all other festivals) but as the day that follows a seven-week count from the festival of Passover. This is to emphasize that Shavuot is an outgrowth of Passover – that the significance of the Exodus came to light only on the day we stood at Sinai. As God tells Moshe [Moses] at the onset of his mission to liberate the Jewish people, ‘This is your sign that I have sent you: when you take this nation out of Egypt, you shall serve God at this mountain.’ [Exodus 3.12]

Standing before Pharaoh, Moses did not merely demand, in the name of God, that he ‘Let My people go,’ but ‘Let My people go, that they may serve Me’ [Exodus 8.1] What is the significance of this liberating ‘service’? It means that man, no matter how free of external constraints, is a finite creature, ever subject to the limits of his own nature and character. That to attain true freedom he must therefore transcend his humanity – his emotional, intellectual, even spiritual self – and access the ‘spark of Godliness’ that is his infinite, supra-human self.” [“What is Freedom?”, Yanki Tauber, www.chabad.org]

With a strength of conviction echoing that of Obama’s quote in the ‘Freedom Reflection’ [p7] the writer continues, exploring the implications of freedom: *“The day we left the borders of Egypt we were ‘free’ in the conventional sense – no longer could an alien taskmaster dictate what we must or may not do.*

We then proceeded to also free ourselves of the alien influences that constrained us from within the pagan habits and mind-set that centuries of subjection to the depraved culture of Egypt had imposed on us, and our own inborn negative inclinations. Then, at Sinai, we were empowered to strive for yet a deeper dimension of freedom – a freedom that is not the negation of adversarial forces and influences, but the surmounting of our own, positive psychic and behavioural patterns.



There is nothing negative about our human potential; but we are capable of more, of raising our achievements to a level in relation to which yesterday's ‘liberated’ self is limited and subjective. Thus

our sages have said: 'In every generation a person must see him-self as if he has himself come out from Mitzrayim (Egypt).' The Hebrew word for 'Egypt,' Mitzrayim, means 'boundaries,' and the endeavour to free ourselves from yesterday's boundaries is a perpetual one.

For freedom is more than the drive to escape foreign and negative inhibitors: no matter how free of them we are, we remain defined by the boundaries of self and self-definition. Freedom is the incessant drive to 'Passover' these boundaries, to draw on our divine, infinite potential to constantly overreach what we are." ["What is Freedom?", [Yanki Tauber, www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)]

The affirmation *"I prefer dangerous freedom to peaceful slavery"* is attributed to Thomas Jefferson. It echoes the words within Jeremiah 8 – *"They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace', when there is no peace."* – which might be paralleled 'Freedom, freedom, when there is no freedom'.

One of the challenges of the modern world is to recognise and respond to the plight of millions who still live in slavery, exodus and exile – whose lives are full of sad songs...



“ We are seeing here the immense costs of not ending wars, of failing to resolve or prevent conflict. Peace is today dangerously in deficit. Humanitarians can help as a palliative, but political solutions are vitally needed. Without this, the alarming levels of conflict and the mass suffering that is reflected in these figures will continue. ”

—ANTÓNIO GUTERRES, UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Attitudes to the foreigner are in many places fuelled by intolerance and xenophobia, whilst Deuteronomy 10:19 proclaims: *“And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”* It’s not an isolated passage. Scripture repeatedly encourages identification with people who find themselves living in someone else’s country and culture. And there several robust statements to the effect that the same laws and regulations should apply both to the citizen and to the foreigner residing with them.

Just as the work of Citizens Advice Bureau has run in dual strands: of responding to individual need on the one hand and of identifying and naming issues to be addressed and effecting change on the other.

So our care for the victims of human trafficking, of sweat shop labour, of refugees from conflict and genocide, of so many in plight, needs multiple strands – immediate care and relief, and action to bring about change...

That second strand, of effecting change, is the ‘dangerous’ part of freedom: It is the call to follow the example of such as Oscar Romero, often called “a voice for the voiceless”, who just before his martyrdom in 1980 spoke these words during a sermon:

“Each week I go about the country listening to the cries of the people, their pain from so much crime, and the ignominy of so much violence. Each week I ask the Lord to give me the right words to console, to denounce, to call for repentance. And even though I may be a voice crying in the desert, I know that the church is making the effort to fulfill its mission.”

Discussion point ideas:

What are the 'sad songs' that we have heard or that we sing?

For whom can we be a voice for the voiceless?

What boundaries have we yet to 'Passover'?

Prayer:

"Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following after you. For wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. Thus and more may God do to me if anything but death parts me from you."

[Ruth 1:16–17]

Loving God, all glory and honour to you!

We worship and adore you for who you are

We ask you to draw close in your mercy, Lord,

to all those who are prevented from expressing their faith,

those whose freedom has been taken away by modern day slavery
in our country and across the world.

We pray for grace and strength for all who suffer in bondage.

We intercede for freedom on behalf of all those who are trafficked and
enslaved.

We pray in faith for the power for your Holy Spirit to break in and change
bondage to freedom!

Session 3

Forgiving, Forgetting & Reconciliation – Freedom & Grace

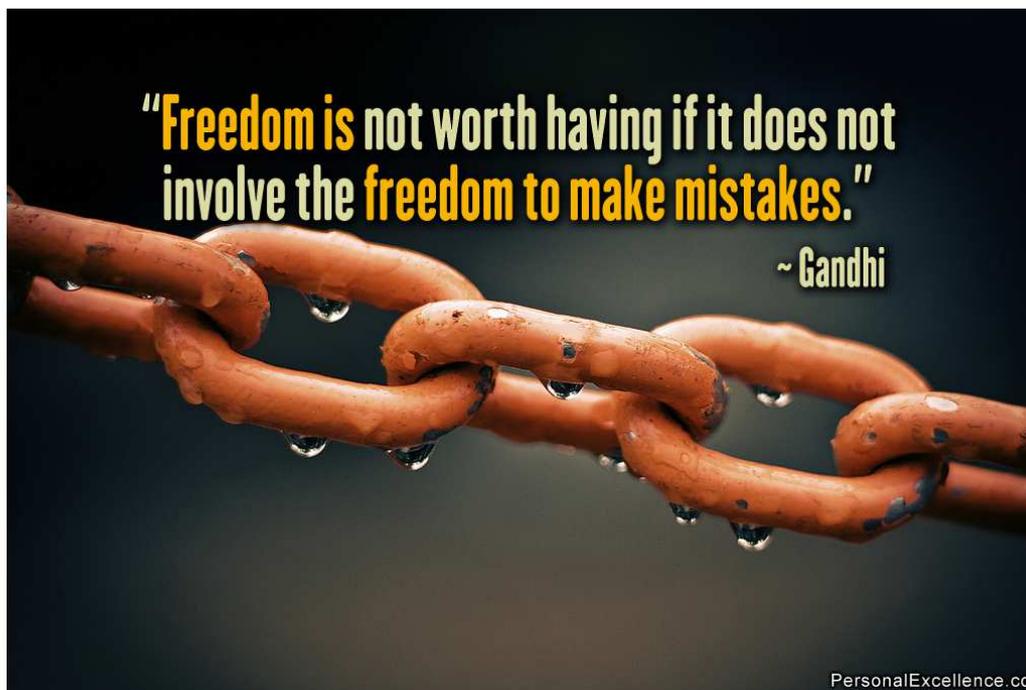


Image from <http://personalexcellence.co/quotes/4196>

Forgetting

There are many things that we do not remember – or do not remember the same way as others who may have been present at the time. Sometimes this is to the good: if all pain were remembered then it could soon become unbearable; if all offence taken were remembered then there might be few relationships of any significant duration.

There is a time not to remember:

In 1915 a set of cigarette cards remembering the 100th anniversary of the battle of Waterloo were designed but not published. It was thought unwise to have such a remembrance when British and French forces were fighting alongside each other in WW1.

Forgiving and Forgetting (or Not?)

One of the most challenging sermons (in terms of preparation needed) that I recall being invited to preach was at a service in South Cheshire marking VJ day with representatives from the Burma Star Association and others who had fought in WW2 in the Far East. Also present were a significant number of visitors from Japan, including veterans of the same conflict. I was invited to explore the theme of 'to forgive but not to forget'.



Unforgivable?

A real challenge confronts us in relation to extreme violence and abuse towards the vulnerable: Just what is unforgivable?

Truth and Reconciliation

After the decades of suffering of apartheid in South Africa it was decided to take the path of restorative rather than retributive justice, and as part of this process a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created. The challenge to all parties of speaking the truth in public was immense and established a model that others have followed to varying degrees – influencing also the Northern Ireland Peace process.

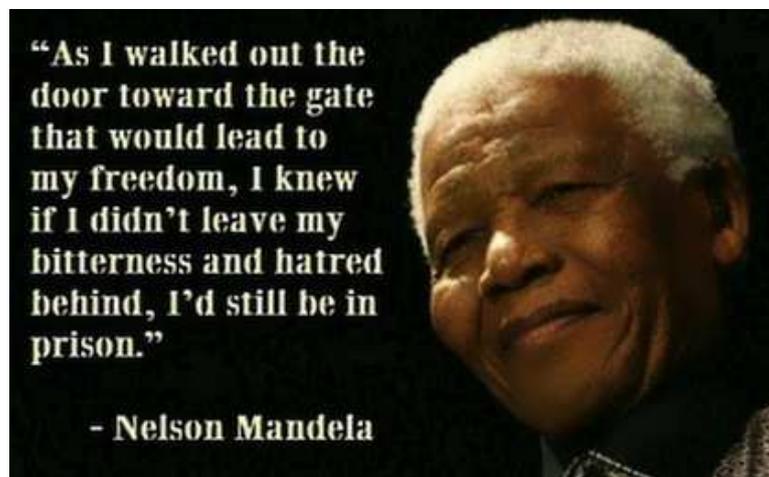


Image from <http://www.theguideistanbul.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/freedom-nelson-mandela-picture-quote.jpg>

Ultimately the Gospel calls upon us to love our enemies and pray for them:

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,

and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” [2 Corinthians 5.16-21]

Reconciliation

One of the great scriptural ‘confessions’ occurs when Daniel, in the time of exile, ponders on his and the whole people’s sins and their need of God’s mercy:

“... the LORD our God is righteous in all the works which he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice. And now, O Lord our God, who didst bring thy people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast made thee a name, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, according to all thy righteous acts, let thy anger and thy wrath turn away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy hill; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people have become a byword among all who are round about us. Now therefore, O our God, hearken to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplications, and for thy own sake, O Lord, cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline thy ear and hear; open thy eyes and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name; for we do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy. O LORD, hear; O LORD, forgive; O LORD, give heed and act; delay not, for thy own sake, O my God, because thy city and thy people are called by thy name.”

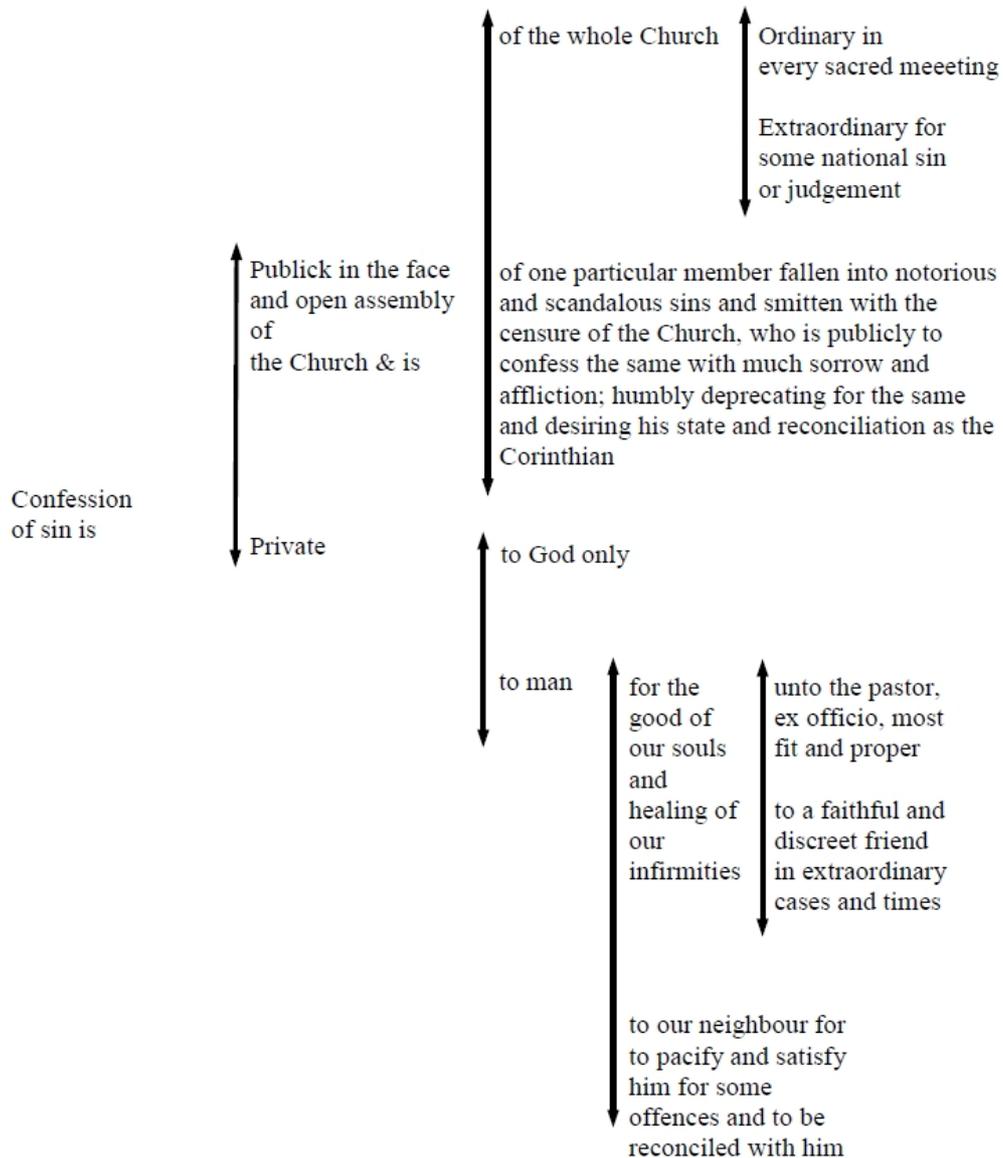
While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy hill of my God; while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He came and he said to me, “O Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding.”

[from Daniel 9.3-22]



For some Christians a discipline of acts of individual confession with ministry of counsel and assurance of the grace of absolution from a priest are very important.

The diagram below was drawn by a 17th century Anglican, reflecting the variety of forms that the ministry of confession and reconciliation might take:



Ministry of Reconciliation

There are many different forms of ministry of reconciliation across the various denominations and traditions of the church. For many it can be a ministry of remembering sometimes painful memories and of journeying to assurance of freedom from sin and of grace.

I recall with thanks that on the first occasion that I, then a lay person, chose to make a formal confession the prayer that the priest asked me to pray before leaving the place was the General Thanksgiving:

“Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you most humble and hearty thanks for all your goodness and loving kindness to us and all mankind. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and the hope of glory. Give us, we pray, such a sense of all your mercies that our hearts may be sincerely thankful, so that we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Discussion point idea:

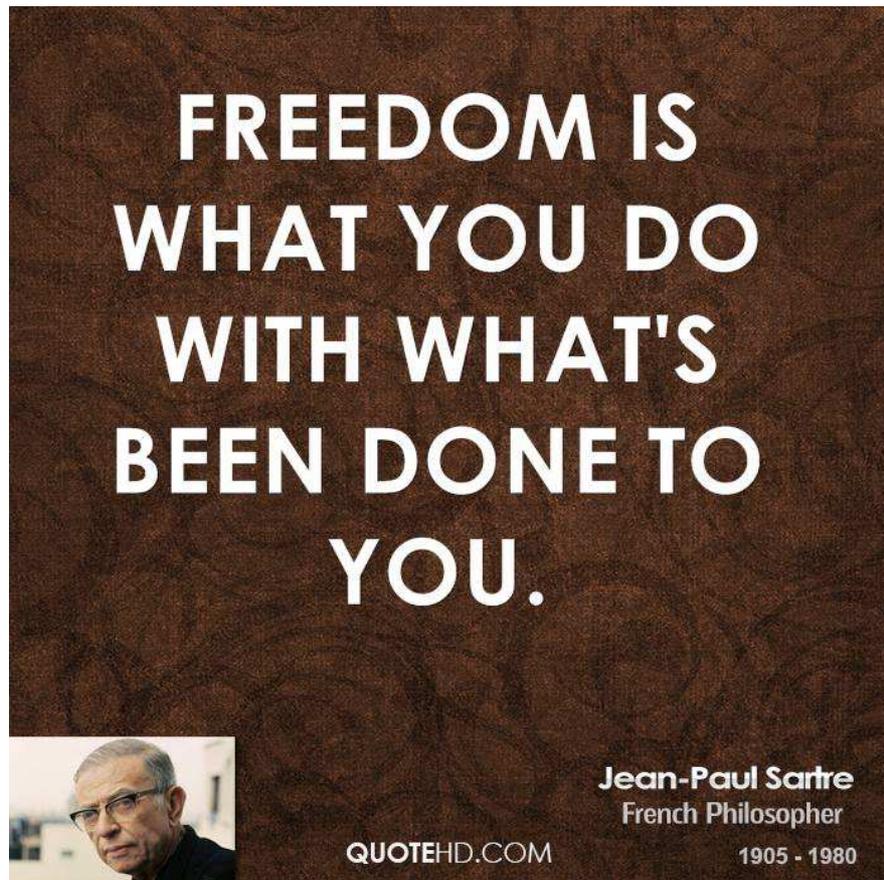


Image from www.quotehd.com

What, for you, is essential by way of freedom?

“sorry seems to be the hardest word” – Is it?

Prayer:

*“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more”* [Hebrews 8.12]

“The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

*“This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord.
I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”*

Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary."

[Hebrews 10.15-18]

Confession and Absolution from New Zealand

"Happy are those whose sins are forgiven,
whose wrongs are pardoned.
I will confess my sins to the Lord,
I will not conceal my wrongdoings.

Silence

God forgives and heals us.

We need your healing, merciful God: give us true repentance.

Some sins are plain to us; some escape us, some we cannot face.

Forgive us; set us free to hear your word to us; set us free to serve you.

The presiding priest/minister says

God forgives you.
Forgive others;
forgive yourself.

Silence

Through Christ, God has put away your sin:
approach your God in peace."

Session 4

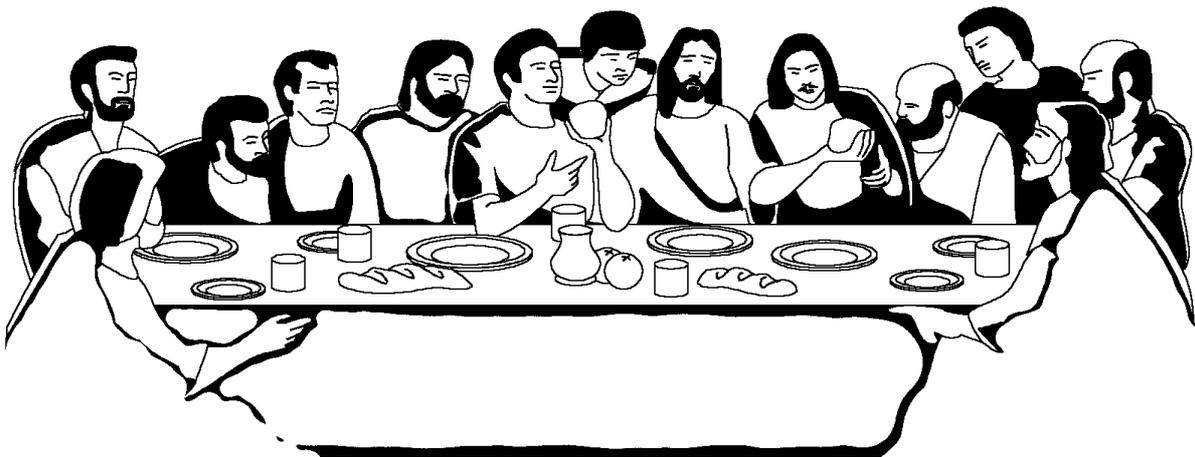
Passover / Eucharist

– “Remember Me”

The Gospels, as well as St Paul in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, record the events of the evening at Passover time when Jesus eats a meal with the disciples which we know as the Last Supper.

St Paul wrote: “... on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial for me’. In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.’”

[1 Corinthians 11.23-25]



And the Gospel accounts relate more detail:

“Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it.” They said to him, “Where will you have us prepare it?” He said to them, “Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room

furnished; there make ready.” And they went, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And likewise the cup after supper, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of man goes as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!” And they began to question one another, which of them it was that would do this.” [Luke 22.7-23, cf Matthew 26.17-29]

When Jesus took the bread at the Last Supper, Luke records that he said *“Do this in remembrance of me.”* But what sort of ‘remembrance’ do we engage in?

Eucharist is more than the remembrance of a past moment – death and sin did not end then, but remain ever present. To echo words (see Session 2) from Yanki Tauber:

“Freedom is the incessant drive to ‘Passover’ these boundaries, to draw on our divine, infinite potential to constantly overreach what we are.”

It is worth noting the echo of this call for remembrance to be more than a recalling the past, to be rather a living in the present, a shaping of the future.

A similar call is familiar from within the concluding lines of the poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae:



In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae (1872-1918)

At each Eucharist we celebrate a victory, a freedom from death and sin that is begun in Christ, continues in Christ and will be ended in Christ: a victory shaped not by weapons of war but by grace, mercy, love and sacrifice, a victory that has eternal dimension and consequence.

As we share in our Communion I believe that in a deep and real sense we join with the saints who have gone before us, the whole church on earth, and those yet to be born in the worship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And it is our continual striving to 'be in Christ', to be the living 'Body of Christ', that enshrines our participation in that victory and freedom.

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many."

[1 Corinthians 12.12-14]



Across the spectrum of Christian traditions there are many understandings of the nature of the Eucharist – reflected in the diversity of names used, including Holy Communion, Mass, Lord’s Supper.

The word ‘Eucharist’ means ‘thanksgiving’ (from the Greek) and reminds us that, at the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine and gave thanks – so also, as we take bread and wine, we give thanks in this prayer for God’s goodness in creation and in our hope of salvation. Echoes of Passover within the Eucharist invite us to celebrate the Eucharist as a feast of freedom from death and sin.

There is one particular strand within the Old Testament tradition of sacrifice that may help us understand more deeply a further dimension to the celebration of the Eucharist. That strand is the *todah* or thanksgiving sacrifice.

In Psalm 116.17 we read: *“I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord.”* The word translated as ‘thanksgiving’ is the word ‘*todah*’, rendered in the Greek as ‘*eucharistia*’.

*“The Christian liturgy... cannot be seen as merely an appropriation of Jewish traditions or the simple re-enactment of Jesus’ Last Supper. The Last Supper itself was anticipatory. “The Last Supper looks to the cross, where Jesus’ words of self-offering will be fulfilled, and to the hope of resurrection. Apart from them it would be incomplete and unreal. Again, this means that the form of the Last Supper is not complete in itself” *1*

*The Eucharist is the new Passover of Jesus only when the promises of the Last Supper are made real by Jesus’ suffering and rising. While the Eucharist fulfils the worship of Israel, there is also a radical newness about it, a renewal of history and of the whole cosmos. *2 The paschal mystery for Benedict is a new song of salvation. Or better, the paschal mystery means that Israel’s liturgical songs must now be sung in a new Christological key. The psalmist’s cry – “Sing to the Lord a new song” – becomes a prophecy of the passage from the old to the new covenant.*

*Benedict locates a long-overlooked dimension of the Eucharist in Israel’s *todah* psalms. These psalms accompanied a “thanksgiving sacrifice” offered by Israelites who had been delivered from suffering or some life-threatening situation. *3 The psalm that Jesus prayed on the*

*cross, Psalm 22, is a todah psalm; indeed, Benedict remarks that all of the psalms that were first interpreted christologically in the early church are todah psalms. *4*

There is a certain formula in the todah. The believer recounts in prayer his experience of desperation in the face of certain death; he recalls crying out to the Lord for help and deliverance and vowing to sing of God's goodness in the qahal if he is delivered. The todah psalm, accompanied by an offering of unleavened bread and sometimes wine, is the fulfilment of his vow, as the believer glorifies God for this great deed of mercy, singing with all joy and thanksgiving of one who has been freed from death.

*Read in the light of "the inner unity" of the Old and New Testaments, Benedict sees a "close connection between todah sacrifice and Eucharist, todah spirituality and Christology." The todah sacrifice is fulfilled in the paschal mystery, and Benedict notices a more-intense "prophetic" tenor to Jewish expectation concerning the todah. "The todah of Jesus vindicates the rabbinic dictum: 'In the coming [Messianic] time, all sacrifices will cease except the todah sacrifice. This will never cease in all eternity. All [religious] song will cease too, but the songs of todah will never cease in all eternity'"*5 For Benedict, the todah is fulfilled in the cross and resurrection of the Christ, Jesus."*

[Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI, Scott W. Hahn, Brazos Press, 2009, ISBN-13: 978-1587432699, pp170-172, *1 Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, 60n1, *2 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 10, *3 Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*: 51-60, *4 e.g. Ps40.1-12; 51; 69, *5 Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*: 58]

The shape of *todah* psalms invites us to remember the work of God in our lives in times of challenge and difficulty and to render praise and thanksgiving with a song in our hearts for all that God has done for us.

Each person will have their own songs to sing of the gracious deliverance and redemptive love of God, alongside the shared songs of the communities and networks to which we belong: in church, in family, in work and in leisure.

I recall that at my secondary school I was once called on to propose the motion at the debating society that "It is every man's duty to sing in the bath". Whilst not the most serious of debates that we engaged upon, it does resonate with this call to have a *todah* psalm, a song of thanksgiving in our hearts to God – and that some of those more

personal songs might be ones that we save for the bath or shower, or at least a more private and personal moment!

But the community of faith is also called to share its own *today* psalms, its own songs of thanksgiving.

“When Christians join in a celebration of the Eucharist, they allow themselves to be questioned by the story of Christ’s self-sacrifice, to be questioned as to whether their present lives are recognizably linked with Christ’s and to be reconnected with the story of Christ’s death and resurrection by the renewing gift of the Holy Spirit. So the awareness here and now of how my life is unfolding, and my reflection on what I am going to put ‘out there’ in linguistic exchange to be recognized and responded to is confronted and enhanced by a story whose form is already fixed: a story which has happened, in such a way that my present options are extended or altered. Effective ritual is a matter of holding myself to account, not of retreating to a comforting alternative time-track in which everything is resolved.”

[“*The edge of words*”, Rowan Williams, publ 2014, p85]

Where Rowan Williams writes of “*what I am going to put ‘out there’ in linguistic exchange to be recognized and responded to*”, I believe that he challenges and invites us to consider both the words and songs of our worship, and the message (spoken and unspoken) of the lives we go out from worship to live.

Discussion point ideas:

Do the words and songs of our worship... especially within the Eucharist...

... engage us and our story – speaking of our experience of grace and redemption, or are they generic and potentially ‘comfortable’? Does worship slip from time to time into a comfortable alternative cosiness?

... question and challenge us – setting our story alongside the Christ-story in a way that holds us to account? Does worship extend and alter our options and choices in life?

... help us discern and celebrate the grace of God effective in the communities we are part of beyond our congregations – often in and through people who might not wish to identify themselves as Christian?

[cf 1 Esdras / Ezra, Isaiah and the role of Cyrus]

... help us live as the real presence of Christ in the world? Are we challenged, envisioned, transformed and encouraged to live lives worthy of ‘the body of Christ’?

Prayer: *(In a group these words may be said together whilst slowly making eye contact with each other)*

*"Christ has no body on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes through which the
compassion of Christ
looks out upon the world,
ours are the feet with which he
goes about doing good,
ours are the hands with which he
blesses his people."
—St. Teresa of Avila*



Session 5

Called to be Saints

– Vocation and our Call to Holiness

The words at the end of Matthew's Gospel, generally known as 'the Great Commission' stand alongside the similar 'commissions' in Mark 16.14-18, Luke 24.44-49, Acts 1.4-8 and John 20.19-23:

"Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshiped him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." [Matthew 28.16-19]

The sense of a global commission from God was not new: consider the words of Isaiah 49.6:

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

And the words of Simeon in Luke 2.32:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."

Whilst 'the Great Commission' stands as a challenge for the Church, it was, I believe, an apostolic commission and is not necessarily to be seen as definitive of the primary vocation of each and every Christian. St Paul wrote in Ephesians 4.11-13:

"And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;"

And in 1 Corinthians 12.27-30:

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?”

To discern something of the common vocation of all Christians I believe that we can find guidance in the opening of many of the letters that St Paul wrote. St Paul begins the first letter to the Corinthians (vv1-3) thus:

“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

He addresses the whole church as being ‘called to be saints’ and elucidates that vocation in 1 Corinthians 12.31-14.1 as he writes of faith, hope and love.

This I believe is a faithful expression of the vocation of each and every Christian – some called to the apostolic task including the fulfilment of ‘the Great Commission’, but all ‘called to be saints’. It echoes a clear strand also found in the Old Testament as for example in Numbers 15.40: *“So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.”* The calling to be holy, to be saints, is a challenge to be worked out individually and in community by each and every Christian person as part of their baptismal journey.

For many Christians part of the outworking of our calling to be saints is enriched by remembering the gracious work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of saints who have gone before us.

The discipline of remembering Saints Days is experienced both as a challenge to who we are and what we do, and as an encouragement – as the amazing and gracious work of God in, through, and sometimes despite, the frail human vessels that we are is realised.



For some Christians the remembrance of the grace of God at work in the company of saints goes further in understanding a relationship between our prayers and the prayers of the saints. This finds particular form in Marian devotion and the use of the 'Ave Maria' prayer.

When the volume "*Exciting Holiness*" was published in 1997 including material to help shape the remembrance of Saints Days in the Church of England the title page included the following acknowledgement:

'The celebration of the Holy Spirit at work in many different ways in the lives of Christian men and women down the ages, whose examples excite us to holiness, is a sign of the great cloud of witnesses with which we are surrounded.' [From the essay Daily Prayer in the Life of the Church in '*Celebrating Common Prayer*' (which first appeared in The Daily Office SSF 1981)]

For many however the language of 'holiness' isn't in any way exciting. Rather, 'holiness' is associated with 'holier than thou' attitudes, examples of hypocrisy and a generally dull, boring way of living.

In the words of '*Lumen Gentium*', one of the principal documents that issued from the Second Vatican Council:

"The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. ... all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history... These people follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ in order to be worthy of being sharers in His glory. Every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity." [Lumen Gentium 40, 41]



Image from <https://messengerinternational.org/blog/devotional/giving-good-behavior/>

Holiness

For many the word 'holiness' has become an individual centred characteristic, and not necessarily an attractive one, rather than one of devoted relationship with God and neighbour. Such echoes of Pharisaism and the excesses of the stricter forms of Calvinism have resulted in the marginalisation of 'holiness' in Christian vocabulary – a sharp contrast to the affirmative use in the hymn, "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!"

Reclaiming 'holiness' and getting excited by it and the call to be saints are aspects of becoming confident in the grace of God and our calling to live the baptised life in the world. Our calling is to bring our gifts (including those we have not yet recognised in our selves) and offer them, allowing them to be instruments of divine purpose rather than individual centred purpose. Therein lies 'holiness' – the purposeful engagement with the divine will that results from prayer and fellowship, from listening and discernment, and then gets our hearts and hands dirty with the business of living to the glory of God.

After the remembering in Hebrews 11 of those who by faith had responded to the call of God in their lives, from Abel, Abraham and Moses to Rahab and beyond, Hebrews 12 begins with the words:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

One blogger wrote:

“We sit back and read of these saints of God, and of their adventures in the faith, sometimes awed, sometimes shocked, and occasionally horrified... and maybe somewhere deep down we perhaps think that it is all very well for them: they were, after all, exceptional and extraordinary people.” [<http://apilgrimsprocess.blogspot.co.uk>]

The blogger continued:

“I discovered another list – though not in the book of Hebrews: a list that tells another side to some of the saints of God... these people who allowed themselves to be open to God and to be used by God to do mighty things. Check this list out:

Noah got drunk, Abraham was too old, Sarah laughed at God’s plans, Isaac was a daydreamer, Jacob was a trickster...

Joseph, well he was a show off in that fancy coat of his.

Moses stammered, Miriam gossiped, Gideon was insecure,

Samson – let’s just say ‘my, my my, Delilah!’

Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was a foreigner, David was an adulterer and murdered Bathsheba’s husband.

Isaiah... er, preached naked for three years, Jeremiah struggled with depression, Jonah ran from God...

and in the New Testament:

Zaccheus was too small, the woman at the well had had five husbands,

Martha was a worrier, Mary Magdalene was demon-possessed

Peter denied Christ, the Disciples fell asleep while praying in the garden,

Thomas doubted, Timothy was too young

Paul was too religious, Lazarus ... Lazarus was dead!

These ‘superheroes’ of the faith... were everyday flawed and fallible human beings, who God called.

Now I want to show you a picture of some of the saints of God I know... and you might know some of them too...

There they are... look around... Look at the saints of God. You – yes you. You are God’s fabulous and fallible and faithful saints called not to straighten your lives out before serving God... but called as you are for who you are, and with all the gifts you have been given by God, to use where you are.” [<http://apilgrimsprocess.blogspot.co.uk/>]

For many the call to be saints, the call to holiness of life, is a call to engage with the mission of the church in proclaiming God’s Kingdom, a proclamation rooted in the events of Luke 4.14-21 when Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth:

“And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’

And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

One of the martyrs of the twentieth century, Oscar Romero, wrote in his book *“The Violence of Love”*:

“When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God’s promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin’s consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.”

This vocation of remembering the marginalised is more than a call to ‘think about’ them, or engage in occasional token gestures of concern. When we read in Hebrews 13.3, *“Continue to remember those in prison*

as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering”, the words are not inviting a mental action alone but a heartfelt call to empathy and compassion.

For some the words of Romero, of Hebrews and of Jesus have inspired engagement with local food banks – “those who are hungry” – with debt relief work – “those who are captive” – whilst others may engage with wider issues in bringing relief or communications to victims of disaster; each, according to their gifting, playing their part in being the community of the saints of God.

Discussion point ideas:

Is 'holiness' a word that excites you or frightens you?

What 'saints' have inspired you?

Prayer:

"Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my thoughts may all be holy.

Act in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my work, too, may be holy.

Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,
that I love only what is holy.

Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit,
to defend all that is holy.

Guard me so, O Holy Spirit,
that I may always be holy.

Amen"

Session 6

Pentecost and Freedom in the Spirit – Christian Diversity: Freedom or Exile?

The Holy Spirit

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” [John 14.25-26]

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” [John 16.12-13]

“Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” [2 Corinthians 3:17 NIV]

“it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials.” [Acts 15.28]

It troubles me at Pentecost when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit that on occasion it seems implicit that until then the Holy Spirit either didn't exist or did nothing. The Spirit moved over the waters in Creation and inspired and challenged the people and the prophets throughout the Old Testament era.

Perhaps in Psalm 51 we find the most explicit language regarding the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” [Psalm 51.10-12]

What became explicit from Pentecost onwards was a fresh recognition of the dimensions of God's being that we discern in Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a Trinitarian perspective. The Shekinah, the presence of the

divine spirit, had been spoken of in rabbinic tradition and Talmudic literature but without being distinguished from the Godhead.

In the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels we also find a fresh awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit in discernment of truth, in providing strength and challenge.

The disciples were told to wait on the Spirit; St Paul was prevented from preaching in certain places by the Spirit; on many occasions the role of the Spirit is a challenging one as when Paul confronts the Galatians:

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain?—if it really is in vain. Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” [Galatians 3.1-5]

Paul is reminding the people that in the power of the Spirit things are now different – that they need to revisit all their life assumptions. And in the process of conversion, of reconciliation, of sharing in Eucharist, of discerning vocation, the Holy Spirit continues to challenge each one of us to revisit all of our life assumptions.

In this journey of life and faith we are invited to find our security in Christ who assured his disciples that the Spirit would “Lead you into all truth” and that the process would include both “what is old” – remembering – and “what is new” – freedom.

Charles Wesley wrote of the emotion of the conversion experience in his hymn ‘And can it be’:

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”

In Galatians 5.1 Paul reminds the people that *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*

Over the centuries the Church itself has in various forms needed to be reminded of those same words as it has wrestled with the tension between freedom in the Spirit and organisation and law that can slip into institutionalisation akin to slavery.

Some have been inspired by the Spirit to new forms of worship and service of the kingdom, some to revisit scripture with fresh insights of exegesis and new hermeneutics, some to fresh models of ministry...

As different insights have come to different parts of the church, that has both positively enriched and energised mission as well as becoming negatively institutionalised in ways that divide and disturb and diminish our credibility to many in the wider world.



When either an old and well understood work of the Spirit or a new and exciting work of the same Spirit is held up as THE way of the Spirit then disunity has so often been engendered.

At an address in 2014 Pope Francis spoke of the mistake made when unity and uniformity are identified as one:

“The same one who creates diversity, all these problems of diversity, is the same one who then creates unity: the Holy Spirit. He does both things: unity in diversity. Unity does not imply uniformity; it does not necessarily mean doing everything together or thinking in the same way. Nor does it signify a loss of identity. Unity in diversity is actually the opposite: it involves the joyful recognition and acceptance of the various gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to each one and the placing of these gifts at the service of all members of the Church.

Today, in the passage of the Gospel that we read at Mass, there was this uniformity of those men attached to the letter: “You must not do it like that...”, to the point that the Lord had to ask: “Tell me, can we do good on the Sabbath or not?” This is the danger of uniformity. Unity is knowing how to listen, to accept differences, and having the freedom to think differently and express oneself with complete respect towards the other, who is my brother or sister. Do not be afraid of differences!”

[<http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-seek-the-unity-which-is-the-work-of-the-holy> 1st Nov 2014]

In each generation part of the vocation of the people of God, called to be saints, is to discern the will of the Spirit and proclaim freedom in ministries of reconciliation, in service of the kingdom, in seeking out those who live in exile from grace and mercy and ministering freely to them as an expression of the love and transforming hope that we have in Christ.

It is well for all who would call themselves Christian to question all that in their lives, and that of their traditions, seem to be obstacles to grace and mercy. Perhaps the ecumenical models of a past generation that envisaged institutional reconciliation are not the road we are called to follow – just as the Spirit prevented St Paul from preaching in Asia and Bithynia [Acts 16.6-7] so the Spirit may have excellent reason for calling us to do otherwise.

Time spent in Sabbath, in fellowship in Eucharist, in waiting on the Spirit, is important in equipping each of us for this holy task and for our individual vocation.

Discussion point ideas:

What hopes and aims do we now have for Christian Unity?

Whilst we live in freedom / exile (?) of diversity what can we do to further God's Kingdom through our shared and our distinctive gifts?

Prayer:

God of power,
whose Holy Spirit renews your people
may the boldness of the Spirit transform us,
the gentleness of the Spirit lead us,
and the gifts of the Spirit equip us to serve and worship you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

HYMNS & SONGS

Suggestions of music and words that might be helpful alongside each study session

Session 1:

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder

Translation by Stuart W K Hine from original by Carl Gustav Boberg (1859–1940)

Session 2:

You'll never walk alone

Anthemic show tune from the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*.

Session 3:

It's a sin – song by Pet Shop Boys

Note the Latin words of the Confession at the end of the song

Session 4:

Broken for me

© 1978 Sovereign Music, written by Janet Lunt

Session 5:

Lord for the years

Words by Timothy Dudley-Smith

Session 6:

Take time to be holy

Written by William Dunn Longstaff (ca. 1882)

Scriptural references

Bible reference	page		
Genesis 1.10 ff	15	Luke 22.7-23	35-36
Genesis 2.1-3	8	Luke 23.14-20	11
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Exodus 3.12	24	John 14.25-26	50
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Deuteronomy 10.19	26	Acts 15.28	50
Ruth 1.16-17	27	Acts 16.6-7	53
Psalms 22	39	1 Corinthians 1-3	43
Psalms 51.4,7	10	1 Corinthians 11.23-25	35
Psalms 51.10-12	10, 50	1 Corinthians 12.27-30	43
Psalms 95.7b-9	10	1 Corinthians 12.31-14.1	43
Psalms 116.17	38	1 Corinthians 12.12-14	37
Psalms 137.1-6	21	2 Corinthians 3.17	50
Isaiah 6.1-8	12	2 Corinthians 5.16-21	29-30
Isaiah 49.6	42	Galatians 3.1-5	51
Isaiah 58	19	Galatians 5.1	52
Jeremiah 8	25	Galatians 5.13-14	7
Daniel 3	21	Ephesians 4.11-13	42
Daniel 9 .3-22	30	Colossians 2.16	15
Matthew 12.1-14	17	Hebrews 8.12	33
Matthew 28.16-19	42	Hebrews 10.15-18	33-34
Mark 16.14-18	42	Hebrews 11, 12.1-2	45-46
Luke 2.32	42	Hebrews 13.3	47-48
Luke 4.14-21	47		

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Revd Colin Alsbury, Frome, Somerset – January 2015

