

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.

Our sermon text today is written in St. Paul's epistle to the Romans 6:12-23

Let us pray ...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight; we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.

For the wages of sin are death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23)

As we can see in our text for this morning - slavery is a key part of St. Paul's argument, and therefore we need to have a think about what this means. Why? Because the Bible talks about it so much. So, what do you think of when you hear the word, "slavery"? I'd suggest that for most of us, our thinking would tend towards the slavery of the American South, or what is depicted in movies and books: a slavery unbelievably racist and brutal, with shackles and chains.

We cannot deny that this happened but slavery in St. Paul's time was something different. Not all, but many slaves chose to be slaves. It wasn't a race thing: slaves and masters were often the same race. In the major cities, it's been estimated that about two thirds of the population were slaves. Perhaps you needed to pay off a major debt, or you wanted to get a higher education. Maybe what drew you into slavery was the honour of being a member of Caesar's household or some other famous celebrity, like a senator or scholar.

So you'd offer yourself as their slave. You might choose to stay a slave all your life, but the average length for people "doing time" as slaves was seven years. You got the security of a good home, a comfortable bed, and you knew where your next meal was coming from. Many slaves were highly educated and well-groomed which was a mark of your owner's status and honour.

But there was this one thing: you were not free to do as you please. You still belong to a master.

So what is freedom then? There are many aspects to this idea. For many people, freedom means the freedom of expression, to communicate their views without fear of retribution. Others think of the freedom to walk the streets in safety without fear of being the target of violence or prejudice. Still others think of freedom as being free from hunger and poverty. That is to say, to live without fear of lack of food, clothing and shelter. This list could include many more examples.

In all of these aspects, there is a common element, and that is the freedom from fear. But what drives this fear? If the last four months or so of COVID

lockdown has taught us anything, it is that we fear death, especially the idea of dying alone.

By this I don't mean just physical death, we know that a physical death will be a reality for everyone. But what I'm talking about is that everyone, deep down, whether they want to admit it or not, knows they have a human soul, and it is here where we find peoples greatest fear.

Our soul is where our consciences pricks at us, we can try to ignore it, but we all carry around our guilty conscience and it reminds us that we have not perfectly obeyed the law of God. It reminds us that we have all fallen short of God's glory, and that we deserve God's eternal punishment that leads to eternal death.

We know that God is the source of all good things in our lives and beyond, but because of original sin (the disobedience of Adam and Eve) we are estranged from God at birth and can not restore a right relationship with Him by our own strength. The fact is nobody trusts God by nature, and so we seek to win God's favour by doing all sorts of good works, or we distract ourselves and avoid thinking about the end of this earthly life. All of this misses the mark, we remain fallen short, and it demonstrates our helplessness and our slavery to sin.

If you listen carefully, and think about it, you can see that the world tries to glorify sin, because it does not accept God or understand the truth about sin and death and hell - and does not want too. The sinful world tries to make God's holiness sound like some awful bondage and limitation of our spirit, and it lauds the ability to freely choose to be wicked and pictures this as a marvellous freedom which empowers people and gives true depth of meaning to our lives and all of human existence.

But they refuse to describe their slavery as "slavery". In their mind set they are free, and we are slaves! Yet we would contend that they are slaves of sin, and that we are free. St. Paul tries to answer the debate by saying that both of us are right - we are just looking at it from opposite perspectives and asks us, which slavery do we prefer? Which outcome is more inviting to us?

"What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!" The death St. Paul writes about here is something deeper than the grave and more horrible to contemplate. The result of sin and evil is more sin and evil - and lawlessness - living without regard for the will of God, and the outcome of those things is the death that we so deeply fear. That death is hell, the separation from the creator of life, and the eternal torment and misery of both body and soul.

This is where the Gospel comes in for us. Our sin require the divine sentence of death, and it has been carried out - but not on us. Jesus bore that sentence on the cross. He died the death that we have earned, and endured the very torments of hell on the cross and in His passion. His death on the cross was

your death. He did it for you, that you might be redeemed and set free from sin.

He died to take the penalty you have so richly earned by sin, and then He rose from the grave to proclaim His victory and tell you that it worked! Your sins are forgiven! God loves you, and you will live forever, even if you die - for you will rise from your grave unto eternal life in glory with Him. *Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed (Is 53:4-5).*

So, having been cleansed and forgiven, having been made righteous and given a holiness which you did not work for but received by grace through faith, St. Paul asks, what do you want to do with it? Do you want to walk away from it? Do you want to defile it and smear the filth of more sins on it?

Surely not! I'm sure your desire is to remain holy. You want to live out that good will of God in your life. Surely you want to keep hold of the freedom that Christ has won for you.

But our freedom is never absolute, and our slavery is more complete and deep and thorough-going than we could imagine. As Christians, we are not slaves, but free children of God. Yet, as Christians we are not free. We are not free to think just whatever we want. We are not free to do just whatever enters our minds to do. We are perfectly free to live as God's servants - his slaves. But to do anything else is to reject God and make ourselves to be like god, and do it our way, instead of His.

And so we are slaves. And this slavery is more deep and thorough-going than you realise. You cannot feel it in its truth because we still wear the traitorous flesh of your birth.

In the story of the Exodus, the Israelites had to learn to trust God in the desert on their journey to the Promised Land. Many times they murmured against Moses and against God, because they remembered their slavery in Egypt, they never had to think of food and other material things because their masters in Egypt provided all these things. But they forgot that the Egyptians did not provide food and clothing for their own welfare, but in order to exploit them. In the end, the Egyptians wanted to destroy them.

The thing is, like the Israelites, sometimes we long for the false security and "freedom" of slavery. Our flesh is hungers to return to sin and evil, but we are now the holy servant of God. Our wills are shaped to be like His will. He shaped it, not you. You may not "feel" that will, but it is at work in you, and the outcome of your new slavery is "*your sanctification.*"

You can see it in your life more easily than you can feel it in your consciousness. God is at work in you, bringing your life and conduct into conformity with His will. The task is never complete while we wear this flesh, infected with sin, but it is happening, and at the end, the outcome of all this

work of God is eternal life for us! *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Mark those works well. You earn and deserve death with sin. Sin pays its wages. But your righteousness is a gift, and your holiness is a gift, and your life and salvation in Jesus Christ is a gift. Even so, you are a slave, always. Either you serve sin, death and the devil, or you serve God and righteousness and He gives you holiness and life everlasting. *The free gift of God - you did not earn it or deserve it, but God chose you and gave it to you, is eternal life in Christ Jesus.*

So, St. Paul tells us to look at it. We have a choice. We can accept what God has already given us, and be His slave, or you can walk away from Him and from righteousness and become the slave of death and hell. But one way or another, you are a slave. I want life eternal. I am sure you do too. Yet, my flesh wants to sin, and, in fact, it is still enslaved to sin. But I want to go to heaven, and so I discipline my body, and I apply the one thing God has given me to combat sin in my life - the Gospel. I apply this gift by hearing the Word; I apply it by remembering my Baptism; I apply it by receiving the body and blood of my Lord Jesus Christ; I apply it by reading the Word of God daily. I apply the Gospel by fellowshiping with believers, and being encouraged in my faith and life as God's slave by them, and encouraging them in turn.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen