

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text – 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Theme: All things to all people

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

Today's sermon is based on St Paul's claim, "For although I am free of all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order that I might win as many as possible." The question for us today is, 'are you willing to give up your freedom so others may know Christ?'

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Paul's Example

Where do *you* stand as a Christian? Just what does it mean for you, and what does it mean for those who know you, that you put your hope and trust in the Triune God? What does it mean that, "Jesus died for me," is not just a catchy phrase; but that you look beyond your own shortcomings and put your hope in Christ's righteousness? Friends, I pray that you are not wishy-washy in your faith but that you cling to it with a passion. Cling to it with all the strength and hope of one caught in the rising flood waters and is then thrown a lifeline from the safety of an SES rescue team, secure on the bank. Hold firm to Christ's salvation which he freely gives to you.

We are to be strong and bold in our faith; and St Peter encourages you to, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reasons for the hope that you have." (1 Pet 3:15). So what are we to make of St Paul's claim, "I have become all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22)? Doesn't it sound as though Paul is prepared to adapt and mould himself to the world and the times in which he lived?

Paul is giving us a wonderful example of being in the world, but not of the world. His starting point as a Christian is that he is *free*. He belongs to no-one. No-one has any claim over him. From where does Paul gain his freedom? From being set free through Jesus Christ. Paul gains his freedom from the sure knowledge that there is nothing any mortal person can do to hurt him. So great is his freedom, he has the confidence to say, "Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom 14:8). This is a man who even has freedom over the power of death.

What would such freedom mean for a man like Paul? He would no longer be bound by the restrictions imposed by the Jewish Laws. Whether a person was or was not circumcised was no longer important. Being ceremonially unclean was no longer relevant. Even eating food forbidden to the Jews was no longer going to stand in the way of a any Christian's salvation! All of these freedom's from the law come because Jesus died on the cross to fulfil God's Holy Law.

Now here's the astonishing measure of Paul's freedom. So great is his freedom, he is willing to give up this freedom and make himself a slave (or servant) to everyone – to win as many as possible (1 Cor 9:19). Paul is now looking for points of contact between himself and those he is put before. If these are Jewish people, Paul will once more observe Jewish customs and restrictions so as to not cause offense to those who are Jewish. Paul's not giving in to anyone, he's just acknowledging that he will surely get people offside if he turns up to the local synagogue with a packed lunch of forbidden food! By not causing offense, there's more chance that people will listen to his message, which of course is Christ's message.

If Paul is meeting with Gentiles, for whom the Jewish laws would mean nothing, Paul does not observe them. Paul actually argued with St Peter that it makes no sense for the Gentiles to be circumcised or to observe any other Jewish customs, for they were already free in Christ.

Paul is constantly listening to those around him and he is adapting his *approach* to the people he is meeting. But whilst Paul is willing to change the way he shares the gospel, Christ's message of salvation *never* changes. This is important for us to hear today. Whilst we might share the gospel message in new and different ways to connect with different people, the message must remain Christ's message. The gospel is always that he died on the cross in our place. Jesus isn't our best buddy. He isn't a spiritual guru. His ministry isn't to make you thinner, or richer, or more likable. He died to save you from your sins. This must always be the gospel message we bring to others.

All Things

I would like to share an example of what being free in Christ might mean for us in our daily lives as Christian people. The following story may be shocking for some people and it's important that you listen to it closely. Some of you have heard this already, but today's theme of being all things to all people is the appropriate time to tell you of when I worked in a brothel. That's right, your pastor has worked in a brothel!

Now, before people start phoning our District President and saying what's going on here, you have to *listen* to the story because it has little to do with gossip but lots to do with God's grace in this day and age.

Sonja and I used to own a carpet cleaning business. One day we received a call from a lady who asked if we cleaned silk rugs. Now I had completed a lot of specialist training and could clean silk, but it is time consuming and carries significant risks. I told the lady I would need to come and inspect the job before confirming a time and price. She gave me the address and I was puzzled because it sounded like it was in Wagga Wagga's industrial area – not the place you'd expect to find a silk rug.

I arrived at the address and discovered I had been invited to clean at the town's local, legalised brothel! With some trepidation I entered and spoke to the lady who rang. The carpet wasn't expensive silk but a simple polypropylene rug which was very simple to clean. I quoted the price and was able to clean it straight away. When I went out to the van to get my equipment, I rang Sonja to let her know where I was. She said two things. The first was that she was glad I had rung her, and not someone from our congregation or anyone else we knew. The second was that we had two vans. One was all nicely sign written, the other was still white, waiting for its paintjob. Sonja told me she was glad I was in the white van!

Anyway, whilst there, I was asked to quote on cleaning the whole establishment. I worked out a price which was accepted, we made a time to do the job and I left. I really wrestled with whether I should do this work or not. If I cleaned the building, was this helping this business to trade – therefore was I helping an unsavoury trade, one that is not honouring God's purpose for people's relationships? After much consideration, I accepted the work – and the deciding factor was thinking about Jesus' example. Didn't Jesus mix with all sorts of people society rejects? Didn't he bring his grace and forgiveness to those who were often ignored by 'nice' people?

The funny thing is that I cleaned the carpets in that building three or four times and each time I was offered a cold drink in summer or a coffee in winter. The people who worked there welcomed me as a guest into their lives. The other thing is that I got to talk with a number of the ladies who worked there. When you put your prejudices to one side and *listen* to others, it's amazing the stories you might hear. The motivation for these ladies and their backgrounds were all different. Whatever we might think about their work, they are people, they have families, they have dreams, *and they hurt* – just like everyone else.

I could have turned back this work – it would have been much more safe for my reputation and maybe my credibility. But through this work I met a number of people often ignored by society until they are abused by individuals. Not that they are innocent of this cycle of abuse either. It's all part of our sinful, broken world. But by entering into this world I was able to bring Jesus' healing presence to hurting people. I didn't do anything particularly bold, but I listened to their stories and I was able to pray for them. As far as I know, none of them changed their lives dramatically, but maybe Jesus' presence through me was one small step in their faith journey? Many of them knew I was a Christian and they were so used to being judged; maybe it was healing not to be judged for what they did but rather who they are as people, created by God in his image. Maybe I was given a chance to look at others through the eyes of Jesus, rather than my own.

God's people bringing his grace

Sometimes its hard to share why you come to church with family or friends. How do you begin to share God's grace with those who are quick to judge the church with all their prejudices? Well I guarantee if you tell them about how your pastor once worked in a brothel, you'll get their attention! **BUT** when you tell the story, remember the point is God being all things to all people and he does this through His ordinary people. Through people being confident of their salvation, they have the freedom to go places they wouldn't ordinarily and as they do so, they bring his grace and presence to hurting people.

This point is important to make. *You have already been saved by God.* Like Paul, you are free, you are a slave to no one. This means there is nothing, nor anyone who can take away your salvation. No one can hurt your faith. So if you have been given this freedom, you are covered over with Christ's righteousness which gives you the ability to go into any situation, no matter how foreign it may be to you. Keep your spiritual ears and eyes open to better understand where others are at. God will tell you what to pray for and if needed, he will give you the right words or actions. God will work through your hands to bring his grace to those who need his help.

Who are those who need God's presence today? Look around you. How well do you know those seated with you? When did you share a meal together or maybe go to a movie or some other social event? What about the people who live in the same street or suburb to you – have a look in our directory? What about the people we often see, but aren't here this week? Or maybe they haven't been here for a couple of weeks. Are they sick, or are they away, or are they angry with God or with the church? Why not pick up the phone and say, "Hello – just thought I'd give you a call to see how you are." You might be surprised with the answer. This is bringing God's presence to those who always need him in their lives.

St Paul had the confidence of God's grace, mercy and righteousness to bring his presence to so many different people. But as special as Paul may have been, he was given no more, nor any less access to God's gifts as any of you here today. You have all been freed through Christ's death on the cross. For as long as you cling with faith to Christ you are freed and strengthened to be all things to all people.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds as you are freed through Christ Jesus. Amen.