



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

What does freedom mean to you?

Clay Nelson © 28 November 2021

We are hearing a lot about freedom these days. Brian Tamaki holding “freedom” rallies in the Domain, violating his bail conditions in the name of personal freedom. Protestors marching down Queen Street in Auckland and gathering on the steps around Parliament in Wellington, angry about lockdowns and vaccine mandates. Farmers clogging motorways from Auckland to Dunedin with their tractors “howling” their objections to the government’s electric vehicle rebate policy. And that is just in New Zealand. Major protests throughout Europe against the reintroduction of restrictions in response to another wave of Covid. Even in the “Land of the free,” Trump encouraged insurrection against Congress in the name of “freedom.” Then there is the debate over whether people have the freedom to spread misinformation about Covid and vaccines on social media.

The thing about freedom is that it is, after all, only a symbol. We read about freedom, dream about freedom, celebrate the idea of freedom, advocate and hope for freedom.

But do ideas like freedom, democracy, public service and public accountability still have the force that they had in times when they inspired a costly struggle against autocracy? Why might the ideas have lost that force and how might they regain it?

It is inevitable that inspiring ideas and words are hollowed out by the human failure to embody them in practice. As a result they become tainted with hypocrisy. The language then becomes uninspiring and loses its force to unify people.

The fate of Christian words certainly reflects this process. One of the most sacred words to describe the Christian life is charity. In its origins it embodies the response to the warm, self-sacrificing, universal and astonishing love of God for each human being. Yet its evisceration can be seen in the popular saying, “as cold as charity.” The origin of this phrase lies in Jesus’ prediction of

a time when people's charity will grow cold. But in its later usage the coldness is seen to mark charity itself. It characterises people who act out of duty but without feeling. They may speak of charity as their motivation but their behaviour reveals hypocrisy or brutality.

This corruption especially affects words originally denoting a tender care for people. Places that offered protection to people in need were called asylums. The word came to represent harsh places to which people were despatched in order to protect the general populace. Similarly, places for people who were mentally ill were named after Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born and cared for by angels. The word was shortened to bedlam, a place of disorder where devilish behaviour abounded. Mary Magdalene, the Biblical character, then considered to have been a repentant prostitute who wept over Jesus, became associated with sentimental tears, and lives on in the word maudlin. The same loss of a high and inspiring meaning and its corruption into something unattractive is more general. We may think of penitentiary, originally conceived as a place where people could turn their lives around, and now synonymous with a harsh and punitive prison. Other Christian words that have often taken on a pejorative connotation are conversion, discipline, piety, purity, correction, submission and humility.

In each of these cases values which were initially strong, positive and humanitarian later came to be perceived as insipid, authoritarian or even toxic. The change reflected the perception by others of the actual behaviour and attitudes of people and institutions who claimed the values embodied in the words. Penitentiaries and correction facilities became places of punishment in which forced conformity with regulation was identified with conversion. Piety became associated with immaturity, conversion with fanaticism, purity with fear of sexuality, and submission with enslavement. These associations, of course, reflected, in part, prejudiced judgment by outsiders. They also reflected, however, the ways in which Christians' actions contradicted their words. The force for good of the tradition was lost and its key words became stripped of their power to engage a community.

This history has implications for our current situation. When reflecting on the continuing hold of ideas like democracy, politics, patriotism, freedom and honour, we should ask first about the associations these words have come to have. Democracy is generally seen as an ideal to be praised, but in practice is identified with politics. This has a pejorative taint. It is associated with

dissimulation, manipulation, back-room and sweetheart deals, remote from the national interest, public service and citizens' daily lives.

Freedom is also an ideal, but is often limited to individual freedom of choice with no entailment to the good of the society or a social bond. This is due to two totally different understandings of freedom.

Those who are liberal leaning tend to think of freedom as an emancipatory ideal. Throughout history, the desire to be free inspired countless marginalised groups to challenge the rule of political and economic elites. Liberty was the watchword of the Atlantic revolutionaries who, at the end of the 18th century, toppled autocratic kings, arrogant elites and slaveholders, thus putting an end to the Old Regime. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Black civil rights activists and feminists fought for the expansion of democracy in the name of freedom, while populists and progressives struggled to put an end to the economic domination of workers.

While these groups had different objectives and ambitions, sometimes putting them at odds with one another, they all agreed that their main goal — freedom — required enhancing the people's voice in government. When the late Rep. John Lewis called on Americans to "let freedom ring," he was drawing on this tradition.

But there is another side to the story of freedom as well. Over the past 250 years, the cry for liberty has also been used by conservatives to defend elite interests. In their view, true freedom is not about collective control over government; it consists in the private enjoyment of one's life and goods. From this perspective, preserving freedom has little to do with making government accountable to the people. Democratically elected majorities, conservatives point out, pose just as much, or even more of a threat to personal security and individual rights — especially the right to property — as rapacious kings or greedy elites. This means that freedom can best be preserved by institutions that curb the power of those majorities, or simply by shrinking the sphere of government as much as possible, preserving the *status quo*.

How we sort out which meaning we pursue has to do with what is our truth. Let me share a parable:

Long ago, a village boy was accused of throwing a stone at a classmate. When charged with this offence, he opened his innocent eight-year-old eyes wide, and said, 'I didn't do it. The devil did it: he pushed me with his tail.'

There is an old saying in English, so old that sixteenth-century preacher Hugh Latimer himself mentioned it as being old in his time. "Tell the truth and shame the devil." In this incident the devil was not shamed, but blamed. And the child had not told the truth.

Statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon, also of the sixteenth century, is probably most famous for his collection of essays, one of which is called "Of Truth". The opening of the essay has always been very quotable: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer." How wise jesting Pilate was, for even then the question of the nature of truth was a thorny one. And Bacon was under no illusions about the limitations of human nature. He thought that most people had "a natural though corrupt love of the lie itself," and that "a mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure."

It seems that Bacon was right then, and right now. But the attitude towards truth has changed. Now we accept the idea that there are different sorts of truth: the phrases historical truth, narrative truth and emotional truth come trippingly off the lips. Then there are the complex notions of fantasy and fiction: we have long subscribed to the notion of novelists making up various "lies" or fantasies in order to tell underlying truths about human nature. But we also have to accept, I think, that a gentleman's word is no longer his bond.

The pious used to intone the Biblical warning regularly: "Be sure your sin will find you out." I've always assumed this meant that your secret wrongdoing would not remain secret forever. My more light-hearted mother used to refer to what she called The Eleventh Commandment: "Thou shalt not be found out."

During an interview on television, a certain leader made an effort not to be found out when asked what his favourite lie was. "I never lie," came the facile reply. "That's my favourite one, too," riposted the interviewer, quick as a flash.

So, being truthful with yourself, what does freedom mean to you? Before answering, do you agree with Bacon's idea that the candle-lights of lies are more attractive than the naked daylight of truth, or do you agree with his final

thought that the knowledge and belief in truth is “the sovereign good of human nature.” If so, it will set you free.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

What does freedom mean to you?