

The Liberating Christ

SERMON · Grace, Sin and Transformation · 26 March 2017 (the Fourth Sunday in Lent)

Exodus 3:1-13

Isaiah 61:1 (quoted)

Galatians 5:1-12

Ephesians 6:12

Colossians 2:15 (quoted)

Galatians 2:20 (quoted)

This evening we will meditate on a very pertinent theme, “The Liberating Christ,” as mandated by the Church of South India. Liberation — വിമോചനം in Malayalam, azadi in Hindi — is a relentless desire in the hearts of the young and the old alike, regardless of religion, caste, creed, colour, or nationality. Of late, the word “azadi” has become a somewhat distasteful one in the political context of our country. Across a lifetime, human beings yearn for liberation from many things which they perceive as binding them down or standing in the way of their progress through life. Interestingly, the azadi slogan was first chanted in independent India by the well-known feminist Kamla Bhasin in the women's movement, demanding liberation from patriarchy, hierarchy, endless violence, and the helpless silence of women. More recently, Kanhaiya Kumar, then president of the Students' Union of Jawaharlal Nehru University, rhythmically chanted the azadi slogans, demanding liberation from all the ills of our society — the oppression of the weaker sections, freedom of speech and expression, and so forth — an action that led to his spending some three weeks in judicial custody. As I listened carefully to his azadi chant, I wished he would add one last demand: liberation from sin and from bondage to the evil one.

Right from the start of His ministry, Christ made it clear that He had come to set captives free. He took up the words of Isaiah and applied them to Himself: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (Isaiah 61:1). As He went about, city after city and village after village, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, all who believed in Him found their sins forgiven and their guilt lifted. But this was not a liberation given once and then finished with; it continued to work in them, freeing them, little by little, from the flesh, from ungodly thinking, and from worldly living. That, I would say, is what salvation really is: liberation, a deliverance from the danger of a life lived in sin.

If I may briefly categorise liberation, it may be social and political, physical, moral, and spiritual. No one but Jesus Christ can offer liberation in all these categories together. In the

Old Testament we read of the social and political enslavement of God's people. The Israelites seem to have formed a habit of falling in and out of slavery, becoming exiles in foreign lands. The passage read to us from Exodus tells us how God saw the misery of His people as slaves in Egypt, and used Moses to liberate them. Later they became captives in Babylon; and even after they reached the Promised Land, they had to fight its inhabitants to claim it. That, too, did not last, and in time they came under Roman rule — their condition when Jesus preached release from sin. At every stage of Jewish history, God graciously liberated them from bondage, one way or another.

It would not be out of place to touch briefly on the Passion of Christ, as we are fast approaching Passion week. I hold the view that the Passion of Jesus was not confined to the period beginning with His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and ending at His death on the Cross. He endured all that because of His intense passion for His people — a passion that had its beginning at the very moment man fell from the grace of God, and that continues, well beyond His death and Resurrection, to our own day. The New Testament takes this liberation further. It speaks of deliverance from the power of evil, from sin, and from death itself. Many in Jesus' own day, including His disciples, expected Him to liberate them from Roman rule. But His liberation was not political; it was liberation from a far more sinister bondage, the demonic powers of darkness, our real oppressors (Ephesians 6:12). At Calvary, Christ confronted those powers directly and set their prisoners free. Paul describes what happened there: “And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Colossians 2:15; see also Hebrews 2:14). And he reminds us that this same struggle continues in our own lives: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Jesus healed people of various physical and mental infirmities. The Gospel reading tells us in detail how He healed a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years, bound by an evil spirit — a liberation for her in every sense. The Gospels record numerous such healings, and in many of them Christ also freed the person healed from the moral guilt they carried, saying, “go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

True freedom, I believe, is found only when we submit ourselves to God's truth. We were not made to be selfish, self-governing creatures; we were made in the image of God, to reflect Him and to glorify Him, and it is when we order our lives by His moral law that we come to know real freedom. Left to itself, human history, marked as it is by sin, would have driven us

to despair. But God did not abandon His creation. Through the Cross, He gave us liberation, and with it a joyful hope, strong enough to send us out to serve love, justice, and peace in this world. It is this freedom that made Paul say, “I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20) — and it is this same liberating joy that belongs to every one of us who believes in Christ. Amen.