

I Want to Break Free (Trinity Sunday)

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[0 : 00] As we sit, let's bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, we pray now that you would open our eyes and open our ears and open our hearts.

That we might receive your truth and your truth would set us truly free. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen. So, if you've been around churches any length of time, you'll have heard preachers say, God has a plan. And in this world which seems so broken at the moment, you might be wondering to yourselves what that plan actually is.

But God does have a plan. In fact, God has more than one plan. First thing he has is a plan for your life. And the problem with that is you'll only discover that plan the more you submit to him and to his will for your life. The more likely you are to know what his plan is for you.

When I look through the annals of church history about the men and women who have done great things for God, the first thing I note about them is they're not plaster saints as we say, but they are people who are surrendered to what God wants for them.

You might like to think about that in your own life. But God has a bigger plan. And the bigger plan is he wants to restore his kingdom here on earth.

[1 : 49] And you need to put away, out of your minds, the idea that God's kingdom is a place. You can't go on chewy and get there. God's rule, sorry, God's kingdom is where God's sovereign rule exists in the hearts of human beings.

God's plan B, if you like, is the church. And I have no idea why God would choose us to be his plan B.

Except that he is a God of grace and a God of mercy. And a God who wants the very best for you. And in the mind of God, the very best for you is when you bring your life under his control. As the old street preachers put it, when you take self off the throne and put Jesus on the throne.

You might well ask yourself, what's going wrong with the world at the moment? And the answer is, I was having lunch with some church leaders just last week, and one of them asked me very bluntly, do I think that what's going on in the world at the moment is the end of the world emerging?

[3 : 21] I said, well, there have been several people throughout history who thought that that was happening, but what I can say is this, it does look as though some of the signs that the Bible refers to are coming about in our generation.

No one can say for sure whether it's the Lord's plan to return, but if we're called to read the signs of the times, then looking at those signs, it does seem that Jesus' return might be imminent.

Someone say amen. Don't sound too keen on it. So the church is God's plan B, and God's plan is this, that the church, you and me, have to model an alternative way of living.

Something to use Graham Tomlin's memorable verse that makes the church provocative, simply by the way we live together and individually, will provoke others to ask some deeper questions, rather than just get through life superficially, like one of those water boatmen running across a pond.

Have we got to where we are? Well, I'm going to give you a very simple explanation.

[4 : 50] It's not my explanation, as a matter of fact. It's the explanation of St. Paul. And St. Paul thought very clearly, the reason why the world is the way it is, and Paul lived in very godless times, the Roman Empire, which occupied the ancient Near East, was a very profligate society.

Just about every sin, terrible sin, that you could think of, existed there. Sexual immorality, lying, cheating, murder, child prostitution, it was there.

And Paul has a very simple explanation of this. He says, it's the result of human sin. The result of human sin.

It's why, not only have I played a part implicitly in the way the world is, but at the same time, I can play a part in making it different.

Paul says in Romans chapter 3 and verse 23, all have sinned. You get that? That's everybody in church today. That's everybody who's existed throughout the whole of human history.

[6 : 19] All have sinned, says St. Paul, and fall short of the glory of God. And if you were to read from Romans chapter 1, you would read there Paul's explanation of the way the world is.

Just let me give you, if I may for a moment, a flavor of that. If you have a Bible to handle, you've got it on your phone, you could turn to it right now. Romans chapter 1.

Here's what the great apostle writes about the way the world is. He says this, That's interesting. That when we sin, what we're effectively doing is repressing the truth about God. Paul goes on, See, one of the things that's going wrong in this world at the moment is that it's being governed by some extremely wrong-headed ideas.

A little bit more about that in just a moment. And then, this terrible verse, verse 24.

[7 : 48] In the light of the sinfulness of human beings, Paul writes this, Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to the sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

I don't think Paul was obsessed with sex. But it's not a bad litmus test of the culture of a society to see what it thinks about sex.

Call me old-fashioned. Call me fuddy-duddy. Call me a man of my generation. But what I see in our culture is sexual profligacy. I read recently about a website.

I've never looked at it and I'm not going to give you the website address because I don't think it'd be good for you. But it's called, the website is Ashley Madison and its strap line is this, Life is short, have an affair.

You know, hands up if it makes you, I mean, not literally, but if that makes you feel sick. You know, David Watson always used to say publicly that one of the Satan's wily tricks to undermine Christians was to encourage Satanists to pray against Christian marriage.

[9 : 17] We have used our freedom to become slaves to sin. And so, John writes in the passage we had read to us, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

He also said this, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples, then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

I have little, I understand easily why the world is the way it is.

And that is, when a society turns to godlessness, let me remind you that according to the last sentence done, there are more people now who have no belief in God than people who believe in him, whatever that belief might look like.

I have no doubt it is the godlessness of our society which creates the wrack and ruin and brokenness of the world. And God has a better plan for the world.

[10 : 34] And that is, it should be governed by his sovereign rule in our hearts. If the son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.

God sees what's wrong but the amazing thing is God has a rescue plan. If sin is the heart of the human problem, then Jesus is the cure.

And when you trust Christ, and if you haven't done that, you can do that today. If you've not trusted Christ and his finished work upon the cross of Calvary, you can make a move to God this very day. But there are three immediate benefits that accrue to you the very moment you give your life to Christ. One is, you are saved from your sin.

Romans chapter 5 and verse 6, Paul writes this, it was when we were still sinful that God sent his son to die for us. How long do you think God would have to wait till you became sinless?

[11 : 50] Don't shout out. A long time, right? The second benefit that accrues to those who trust Christ is this, you are saved from the coming wrath.

1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10. Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica that they're saved from the wrath of God which is about to fall on society.

And the third thing is, and this is not about pie in the sky when you die, but the third benefit that accrues to you the moment you trust Christ is that you will not have to face a Christless eternity. The wages of sin is death, wrote Paul, but the free gift of God is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus. Here is God's plan.

The rescue act and then, amazingly, God doesn't leave us on our own to kind of struggle with all this, to work out how we can live our lives, how we can live obediently to Christ and find the freedom that he talks about.

[13 : 09] How do we allow the Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out? When I was a young fellow, we used to sing an old schism chorus.

It was called No, Never Alone. Some of you look old enough to remember it. It goes like this, The world's fierce winds are blowing, temptation sharp and keen.

I have a peace in knowing my Saviour stands between. He stands to shield me from danger when all my friends are gone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.

The chorus is No, Never Alone. No, Never Alone. He promised never to leave me. No, Never Alone. If you're trying to live your Christian life without the assistance of the Holy Spirit, who will illuminate your conscience, who will teach you what Jesus has taught us, if you're trying to do it without the Holy Spirit, it's going to be a real uphill struggle.

[14 : 23] And maybe some of you are honest enough to recognize that in your life today. God's plan B is the church, you and me.

A people who would believe in Jesus, a people whose earnest desire would be to become more like Jesus. and a people whose primary aim would be to do his will.

Matthew chapter 7 and verse 21, Jesus says, Not everyone who calls me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those, only, who do the will of my Father, who is in heaven.

I don't know what your assessment would be. And, in a way, I don't need to know.

But I wonder if you think about the church and the call to be distinctive because we're invited to live as Jesus wants us to live.

[15 : 32] I don't know what you think. What do you think when people look at the church? Just suppose a Martian arrived on planet Earth and looked at the Church of England just now.

What conclusions do you think he might draw? Do you think he would see a distinctive community fired up to live as Jesus wants us to live, to offer the world a different way of living?

Or do you think he would see a group of well-meaning people who do some good things occasionally but actually whose aspirations about life seem exactly the same as everybody else's? Do we look different? God calls his church to account in times of godlessness. What would God say to you, my friend, about the quality of your Christian life today?

In John chapter 8, we're told that Jesus was specifically talking to Jews who had believed in him. In other words, the starting point for all this stuff is belief in him.

[16 : 54] Today might be the day that the Holy Spirit whispers in your ear. and what you see in this passage is two fundamentally challenging things that Jesus has to say to the world and the way it is.

The first thing is about freedom. I think today our view of freedom has been fashioned by an idea that was initially applied to the world of economics.

it's called libertarianism. It's what leads to free market economies. But that now has been applied to ethics.

We don't want any restraint. We don't want any moral baggage loaded upon us by anybody in today's world. In the book of Proverbs you've probably heard that verse that says where there is no vision what does it say?

The people perish. Did you know that the Hebrew in that verse more accurately means where people have no revelation they cast off restraint?

[18 : 10] Do you see a society that's happy to work under restraint to live life with some moral values? Or do you see a society that's making it up as it goes along?

When there is no revelation the people cast off restraint. See not only is the answer Jesus but Jesus is concerned as well to set your life on a new track.

Do you see what's going on in this passage? Jesus has a completely different idea of freedom than the way the world will teach you. So this is it.

The world says you can do what you like as long as it doesn't harm other people. What a fatuous way of thinking that is.

How can you ever know whether your example affects another person or not? How can you know if you think you are secretly having an affair with another person?

[19 : 32] How can you know that when your spouse eventually finds out is it going to affect them? Of course it's going to affect them. No. Jesus has a different plan and the plan is this that we will find freedom when we live as he wants us to live.

The primary healthy desire of a disciple of Jesus Christ would be to live as Jesus wants us to live.

please please please don't buy into the idea that freedom is I can do what the heck I like as long as it doesn't hurt other people.

Those of you who know your philosophy know this stems from a guy called John Stuart Mill. And John Stuart Mill was very very clear.

He said this, this is what he wrote, the only purpose for which power can be rightly exercised over any member of a civilised community against his or her will is to prevent harm to others.

[20 : 44] Look around you. Has that view of freedom led to a civilised society? You tell me. The second thing is Jesus has a completely different view of truth.

Truth in Jesus' mind is entirely applied to the word of God. His words and the word of God as revealed in the whole of Holy Scripture.

You don't think the Old Testament is important? I beg to differ from you. I've just been asked to go to a church in this deanery and explain why the Old Testament is important. I mean, not least because the early apostles only had the Old Testament to preach the gospel from.

But this view of truth is very basically that if human beings are to live in a civilised way, we need to agree on some truths that are absolute, not truths that are slippery, that are difficult to get your hand on.

In the 50s and 60s in the world of universities, an idea came to bear. It was meant to be largely for literary criticism, but it stretched its way into ethical thinking as well.

[22 : 11] It was called deconstructionism. You don't need to know about that, but what it did do was it bred in the hearts and minds of men cynicism. Any statement of truth is immediately suspect, and the only truth that I can believe in is the one that I feel might be the right one.

Thus, Meghan Markle, in that unfortunate interview with Piers Morgan, where Piers Morgan, improperly in a way, just called her an outright liar to her face.

What was Meghan Markle's response? Very modern response. truth. She's being accused of being a liar. Do you know what she said to him? That's my truth.

Truth now is no longer seen as something objective, something I'm absolutely, it's subjective. And it depends on what I feel. Jesus has a different idea.

No wonder our society is going haywire with these cockeyed ideas at the heart of it. And I wonder when we will understand this.

[23 : 26] I wonder when we will understand that the church, I mean it's about you individually, but it's about us together. That together we seek to live a life that is distinctive.

I think many of you may have the idea that to be distinctive in Christian terms is to be weird. And I was telling my home group the other evening that when I worked in Slough, there was a community there of lay people who were seeking to live a distinctive life.

You know, full credit to them, except they just came across as weird. They wore brown dressing gowns, and for some reason, tell me where you would find this in the Bible.

They had a thing against soap. You know, don't get downwind of them is my advice. To be a Christian is the most normal way to live, not abnormal way to live.

Life of faith is a team sport. God's love. It's not just about you. It's about us and our witness in this town that God has called us to serve and to play our part in its salvation.

[24 : 59] It's about collectively showing to the world in which we find ourselves that there is a different way to live. You don't have to be mown down by the values of thinking in this world.

No, there is a different way. And I wonder, when am I going to stop making excuses? I wonder, when are you going to stop making excuses?

The end of the book of Judges, the very last verse in that book, there is a verse I've come to love. It says this, in those days, and this was during a time when Israel had gone through terrible military and political upheaval, et cetera, et cetera.

And just so you know, when men couldn't hack leadership at the season of Judges, God called a woman called Deborah, who, it turns out, was quite handy with the jawbone of an axe, and took it to the Philistines and stuck it on them.

In those days, the last verse says, Israel had no king. everyone did as he saw fit. Can I say something that's going to sound very simplistic to you, and I don't apologize for it.

[26 : 25] If Jesus is not the king of your life, if Jesus is not the king of our society, then people will do just that.

They will do what they see as fit. I have, if I can find it on my phone, that wonderful hymn by Bishop Walsham Howe.

It was a time when bishops did good stuff. And he wrote these words in that amazing hymn, It is a thing most wonderful.

He said, I sometimes think about the cross and shut my eyes and try to see the cruel nails and crown of thorns and Jesus crucified for me. Even could I see him die, I could but see a little part of that great love, which like a fire is always burning in his heart.

It is most wonderful to know his love for me is so free and sure, but it is more wonderful to see my love for him so faint and poor.

[27 : 54] Is this a moment? Is this a moment when the Holy Spirit shakes your soul and wakes you to the spiritual nonsense that's going on in the world and we might decide together to stand up, to pray up, to speak up and collectively as well as individually make a difference in this world.

Of course, there are green shoots all through the history of the church. Wonderful things happen and we've heard about TLG. That is wonderful. But the most wonderful thing is when human eyes are opened and they see Jesus, not sitting on a throne with a massive crown on his head and loads of people serving him, but on a cross, which, thank God, is an empty cross.

because Jesus is alive and he's here now and he wants to occupy your soul, that together we might show the world there is a different way to live.

Can we pray? Our gracious Lord, we are truly sorry that our lives can fall so short of what you want from us.

And Lord, I cannot speak for anybody else in this church and their sin, but I can certainly speak for my own. And Lord, please fill me, fill us, with that Holy Spirit.

[29 : 56] Lord, that we might truly become people that you want us to be. That, Father, people would look at the church and see a genuine alternative way of living, something that's not weird, but which is so normal, it would be striking and provocative.

And Father, I pray now, Lord, as we gather together, that you would speak to our hearts and give us, Lord, conviction that we need to do something.

So, Lord, I pray that you would speak to us today and that you would help us individually and collectively to be that different person, that different community, whose lives become meaning makers in the lives of others.

And we ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and those who agreed said together, Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.