

The basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome contains relics that are said to be the chains which held Saint Peter in prison in Jerusalem before his miraculous liberation as related in the Acts of the Apostles. I remember it most vividly because each year a group of us from the English College in Rome used to go there to provide the music for the Corpus Christi procession which began there and ended in the Armenian church on the other side of the square.

What most people know the church for, however, is the stunning sculpture of Moses by Michelangelo. Moses is depicted with the tablets of the law in hand, and with two curious horns on his head, which represent an early understanding of the text from Exodus describing his face as so radiant with the glory of the Lord that the people could not look on it.

This picture of Moses is similar to the one most people would conjure up if asked, because it contains the Law and the glory of the Lord. But I have a different picture of Moses, because what I like to focus on is the diffident young man called by God to set his people free from slavery in Egypt. Moses is the chief instrument of the liberation worked by God, although he tries valiantly to persuade God to choose someone else, and even ends up with a companion – Aaron – to help him speak to Pharaoh, and to give him support and courage along the way. Moses is no isolated hero.

Indeed, I find the figure of Moses an attractive one not because of the eventual great authority he gains through his relationship with God, but because of his need to have Aaron and others around him to make up for what is lacking in his abilities, and to give him strength when things get difficult.

Moses for me is a figure of liberation reached by working together, and for us, who believe that our liberation is reached by the cross of Jesus, there are some interesting parallels. Jesus spends time alone with God his Father, but when he acts and teaches he is seldom alone. When it comes to standing before the bearers of power, like Pilate, Jesus has little or nothing to say, like Moses, who tells God he is a man 'slow of speech and slow of tongue'. As Jesus in Gethsemane asks for the chalice to pass him by, so Moses (not once, but fully three times!) tries to talk God out of sending him to Pharaoh. In the battle with Amalek, Moses needs Aaron and Hur to hold his arm up so that Israel may prevail in battle. Even on the cross, Jesus is flanked by the two criminals.

Crucial to understanding the whole Exodus story is an understanding of its underlying meaning. By this I mean

that it is clear what Moses is leading the people of Israel *from*, but it is not entirely clear to them what he is leading them *to*. Put another way, they have freedom from Egypt, but they are not clear or convinced what they have been freed for. God has a clear vision for his people, yet on their journey through the wilderness they try God's patience sorely through their lack of trust in God and in Moses, and on arrival at the Promised Land, though their military scouts reckon that they have a chance of conquering it – and Moses knows that with God they will certainly prevail – the people are too afraid to forge ahead, so they go back around in a circle for another generation until eventually it is Joshua that leads them across the Jordan into the land promised by God. They even remember their captivity with rose tinted glasses: *'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing,*

*the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'* (Numbers 11.4b-6).

And of course there is the ultimate insult: the golden calf made by the people because Moses is a long time up the mountain of Sinai with God. It seems to me that in John's gospel the constant misunderstanding of Jesus's teaching echoes this theme – and certainly the willingness of the leaders of the people to destroy the voice of God in Jesus is a clear parallel with the faithlessness of Israel in the desert (and elsewhere in the Old Testament).

Why, then, do we find liberation such a hard thing to accept? Why do bullies, once freed from bullying, often end up as bullies themselves? Why do some abused people become abusers themselves? Why do those

liberated from oppression become oppressors themselves? Could it be possible that we don't always know what's best for us? or do what's right? As a constant theme in human history, I would suggest this must be an element in that mysterious reality we call Original Sin – one of the core faults common to all humanity, against which we must struggle, and from which the cross is meant to set us free.

Theologians and moral philosophers have struggled for centuries to understand what exactly it means to a human being to be free. They grapple with the notion of Free Will, and the biggest issue is the apparent contradiction between an all-powerful God and the evil which comes as a result of our actions and as a result of the way the world just is. But what if this isn't a contradiction at all? What if God is not really all-

powerful, at least in the absolute way ancient philosophers would have understood it?

The whole idea of God as all-powerful is in fact a creation of the human mind, which needs to be able to work in clear definitions. To define something you must have criteria against which you can judge it, and the criterion for God is that God is not like us. This means that where we are weak, God has to be strong; where we tell lies, God is truthful; where we are fickle, God is faithful – add your own if you like! God is the source and creator of all things, so it stands to reason that God must be all-powerful as well.

A very powerful comment made by the Archbishop of Canterbury concerning the women bishops issue applies here I think: he said ‘It isn’t a zero sum game’. By this, he means that it doesn’t fit the limits of mathematical logic, where something is either true or it isn’t.

Sometimes we have to have the humility to recognise that truth lies somewhere beyond the limits of our minds, and I think the truth about God’s power and Free Will lies somewhere in that realm.

The reality is that when the Word became flesh the God this reveals to us is a God who shares our limitations. As I said yesterday, this is a God who is on the same playing field with us, and if this casts question on a classical understanding of God’s power, it also means we have to work with a modified idea of what it means to be free. Jesus tells his hearers: ‘If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed’, and I would suggest that this is not primarily freedom *from* slavery to sin or anything else, but freedom *for* the unbounded, unlimited love which God shows us in Christ.

This love shown us in Christ reveals a God who is vulnerable to persecution and suffering, a God who is

bent on sharing all human limitation, even as far as death – which is obviously what we are in the process of remembering in Holy Week.

When we pray for freedom, then, we start with a recognition of those things which hinder our freedom – principally our personal sin and the sin that mars the world of which we are a part – and then what? It has to be a freedom not just to do what we like unfettered (though that is often all we think about when considering freedom) but a freedom to choose God's love; to choose to love each other as God loves us; to choose even to love our unlovely selves.

This is the sort of freedom that does not end up turned back on itself. This is the sort of freedom which God exercised when sharing our weakness. This is the sort of freedom we see most clearly in the cross.

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