

*Christ has set us free*

July 1, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There's a sort of unofficial season that occurs every year between Memorial Day and Independence Day when we focus, more or less, on patriotism, what it is to be free, the freedoms we enjoy under the Constitution, the freedoms we have to move about this magnificent country with no frontiers or borders to hinder our travel, the freedom of religion or the freedom *from* religion. I want to share some thoughts with you this morning about freedom, but not those I just mentioned.

Who is free? This is a question, which has been asked, I guess, since the beginning of human experience. The classical Greeks maintained that freedom was measured by a political yardstick. Personal freedom resided in the form, constitution, system or fundamental principals of government.

Long after the political freedom of the Greek state had vanished, the Stoics still contended that, as thinking,

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rational beings, people could nevertheless remain free by keeping themselves above the tyranny of passions and emotions. They taught that freedom resided in being unmoved by emotions, either joy *or* grief. Indifference to pain and pleasure was what meant freedom. The Stoics were the first one to turn *sweeping one's feelings under the carpet* into an art form. Their successors are numbered well into the tens of thousands.

The Hellenistic Gnostics, on the other hand, contended that human freedom meant having independence from the evil force and demonic powers that controlled a person's fate. Salvation, or freedom, came through participation in mystery religions, their secret rites and the following of occult teachings connected with them. Salvation was reserved for the spiritually elite, who entered the deeper mysteries of the universe as they moved toward perfection. You may, I have no doubt,

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find any number of their successors in the Yellow pages of the phone book.

The quest for genuine human freedom presupposes the presence of some sort of bondage to one degree or another. If we are even slightly honest, we can see that we are not, as the Stoics maintained, purely rational beings, superior and free. We are not independent of passions, fears, addictions and behaviors that we know control us. We hardly come across as Masters of our fate. Even our best days exhibiting maturity, consistency and love are just as likely followed by days teeming with wretched thoughts, words and deeds.

Will some kind of secret knowledge or rites of initiation into the mysteries of nature, of God and of the world set us free as the Gnostics believed? If we turn our lives and wills over to some guru or star

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reader or sage, we're going to find the truth? Not likely.

In his profound assessment of the human condition, written to the Romans (NRSV Rom. 7:18-20, 24-25) Paul confesses, *I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate* (v. 14). He goes on, “*Now, if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me* (v. 20). *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord* (vv. 24-25).

In the opening sentences of today's Epistle, Paul wrote to the Church at Galatia (NRSV 5:1, 13-25), *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery* (v. 1). In the wisdom born of immense struggle, Paul has articulated the great paradox of faith and freedom. As long as he is living in the flesh (v. 16) with his heart

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fixed on all that is of this world, he is in conflict with himself. He seeks freedom in places he can never find it, a slave of the created world, its pleasures and promises. It hasn't worked. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control* (vv.22-23).

Paul is saying that God in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, is the one true source of human freedom, in which all human dignity finds its fulfillment. On our own we are incapable of winning our freedom. To do what we want, when we want, according to our wants is to be reduced to the rank of a self-absorbed slave. Furthermore, to abdicate our wills to another human power or institution will inevitably shape and form us into its image and likeness, rather than the image and likeness of God. Still more bondage. Only in surrender to the power of God can we find the *service that is perfect freedom* (BCP p.57) because in this act of surrender, we begin to will what God wills. The

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compulsion to serve *only self* weakens its grip on us. Anxiousness born of self-reliance and self-service dissipates and is overshadowed by the desire to live freely as a child of grace. We live for Christ, and, hence we live for each other. We experience the paradox of rebirth, the giving up of self for the gaining of self, for the *giving* of self.

*This* is the fullness of Christian liberty. *This is freedom.*

**AMEN.**