

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	28 June 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fourth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

‘Having been set free from sin, (you) have become slaves of righteousness’. In today’s New Testament reading, St Paul sets out one of his most important themes – one that runs through many of his writings – what it is for Christians to be free; what is the nature of freedom that we have in Christ.

Freedom – and the loss of it – is of course always a current subject. When a country or territory is invaded or threatened, its people fear for the loss of their freedom. When minority groups argue for their rights, freedom is normally a central concern. When children are abused, one of the most shocking aspects to this is that their freedom is taken away by others more powerful than they are.

But what does freedom actually mean?

We might think that there’s a simple and obvious answer to this: to be free is to be able to do whatever I like. The freest person is the one with the greatest menu of choices available to them. The truly free person can do whatever they want to do, whenever they want to do it.

But, St Paul – and following him the entire Christian tradition – would ask whether this is truly what freedom means. Let me give a couple of examples that suggest it may not be.

First, think about somebody who is seriously addicted to alcohol or drugs. If freedom were simply about doing we want, then someone in that condition would be truly free if they could drink or take drugs whenever they liked. In fact, however, the opposite is true: for those who have those kind of addictions, real freedom is shaking off the addiction: no longer being held in their power; being free not to have them whenever but to do without them.

Another example: last week, I had the rather extraordinary experience of having my portrait painted by a very long-standing friend and former teacher. Inspired by the portraits of predecessor Deans in our sitting room, he kindly offered to do this for me. I say this just to be clear that you are not funding it through your giving to the Cathedral. I found the way he painted fascinating, and quite different from what I had expected. From my side of the canvas, he was apparently applying completely random daubs, from which my face started to emerge. How did he manage to paint in such a very free and fluent way? Well it was of course as a result of a lifetime's training and practice. Freedom to paint in the way he does was achieved not by just doing whatever he wanted, but as a result of the most rigorous training and discipline.

So I hope that from these two examples it will be clear that being free is not simply about being able to do whatever we want. So, going back to St Paul and our reading from the letter to the Romans, what does St Paul have to say about freedom?

First and foremost, St Paul says that the decisive factor is that Jesus Christ has set us free from sin and death. Like a dangerous addiction that holds us in its power, sin and death have a grip over all of us in a fallen world. But, by coming into the world; by sharing in our human condition including our physical death, and then being raised from the dead, Christ has won a decisive victory over sin and death. Those things that drag us down; those things that diminish us; our thoughts, words and actions that we know are wrong but find

unavoidable. None of these are going to enslave us because Christ has made us free from.

Of course, because we are in a fallen world, we are not just going to shake off everything that drags us down. And for this reason, the Holy Spirit has been sent to dwell in our hearts. The Holy Spirit, which is given in a special way at Confirmation, but remains active with us and within us each day of our lives, enables us not just to be free from sin but to be free for righteousness; free for flourishing; free for thinking, saying and doing good things; free for God and free for others.

Freedom from sin and freedom for righteousness is a deeper and more satisfying way of thinking about freedom than the way we often encounter and assume. So finally, two things just to pull out of this for each of us.

The first is that, in the Christian vision, discipline is not the enemy of freedom but accompanies and supports it. We saw this in my example of the painter I mentioned: that he can only paint as freely as he does because he was first strictly trained and disciplined. Likewise, Christian disciplines such as receiving communion regularly on Sundays, prayer, Bible reading do not, as we might think, constrict or threaten our freedom but rather support and extend it. Christian disciplines such as these set us up so that in the rest of our lives we can be empowered to act more freely.

Secondly, service is not the enemy of freedom but its natural result and its outworking. For, again, in the Christian vision of freedom which we hear in St Paul, freedom from sin; freedom for righteousness turns us away from our self-preoccupation, and towards God and our neighbour. We might have thought that freedom consisted in being able to please ourselves, but we find that a truer freedom is achieved when we are turned away from ourselves and towards the service of God and other people. In the

words of the Collect for Peace in the Book of Common Prayer,  
God's service itself is 'perfect freedom'.