

A Picture of Freedom

BY MATT COOK

In a wilderness devoid of bread, but full of stones, we learn a powerful lesson from Christ. True freedom comes not when we can do whatever we want, when we want to do it. True freedom is not in-dependence, but *in* dependence.

When is the last time you smelled raw sewage? For me it was on a recent visit to an “informal settlement” just north of Johannesburg, South Africa. “Informal” is a nice way of describing the ramshackle collection of houses made from tin, cardboard boxes, and the occasional piece of plywood.

Our group was led by a tiny woman with a larger than life presence. Sister Jean Stewart is a nurse who wanders the slums in the region just north of South Africa’s capital city. Day after day she returns to care for the people living there – many of them immigrants, many of them HIV positive, and all of them caught in the harmful web of poverty and dislocation.

Yet even in the slums, there is hope. Jean and many of her patients radiated joy, which surprised our healthy, middle-class group from the suburbs of America. One woman in particular stood out. In her late twenties, she had three children. After her husband cheated on her with a prostitute, he had come home and transmitted to her the AIDS virus. She was at the point of death when Jean gave her the powerful new class of drugs that can turn HIV into a chronic disease rather than a death sentence.

“I have so much to be thankful for,” the woman told us. “God is so good to me!”

After we walked away, Jean could tell that I was somewhere between intrigued and puzzled. “That woman is happy,” said Jean “because she has learned that no matter what else is taken from her, she can always depend on God.” Jean kept going...right on to my toes! With a gentle smile she said, “in my experience the problem with wealthy people is that sometimes we have so much, we don’t even realize that we’re always trying to do things all by ourselves.”

Is that what freedom looks like: in-dependence? Is freedom the state we arrive at when we can live our lives without having to depend on anyone or anything else? Or is it something else?



When is the last time you were hungry enough to eat a rock? In the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel Jesus has been out in the wilderness for forty days, and he has not eaten a thing. That is when the tempter shows up, saying: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread" (Luke 4:3). That is a dare if I ever heard one! Not only that, it's a chance to kill two birds with one stone, or loaf, as the case may be. Jesus can prove he the Son of God *and* he can get rid of his hunger in one fell swoop. Of course Jesus does something a little different. He stays hungry but quotes Scripture. "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'" (Luke 4:4). Including a bit more of Jesus' allusion to Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew's gospel has it: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Forty days in the wilderness without food followed up by a Bible memory exercise is not exactly my picture of "freedom." How about you?

What comes to mind when we hear the word "freedom"? Maybe we think of two weeks away from work, with a week of that away from the kids, preferably in the mountains, or on the beach. A few good books, some nice restaurants, and (most of all) time to do what we want to do, when we want to do it. "If we could just get away from it all," we say to ourselves, "we would be free and then we would be happy." Is that our picture of freedom – being un-encumbered?

Or maybe it is not personal freedom that comes to mind, but political freedom. Maybe the freedom we are thinking of is the freedom of journalists to critique the government, or the freedom of individuals to assemble without the government putting a stop to it, or the freedom to pray aloud whenever and wherever we want without the government getting in the way. Is that what freedom looks like to us?

Those pictures of political freedom are not bad; indeed, compared to a few days at the beach they are downright noble. Yet both pictures, the beach and the Bill of Rights, are highly contingent on favorable conditions. In the first picture of personal freedom we can only be happy when all or most of those conditions are met: when our families are not demanding our attention, when our jobs are laid aside, and so on. And in that second, nobler, picture we are only free when the government allows us to do what we want, when we want.

If that is what we mean by freedom, then most people around the world are not free. It is a well-known statistic that more than two billion people live on less than two dollars a day, but did you know that ninety-five percent of

people live on less than ten dollars a day?¹ For more than three quarters of the world's population, the idea of a few days at the beach is laughable, if not inconceivable. Regarding political freedom the numbers are just as staggering: less than thirty percent of the world's population live in nations that guarantee freedom of religion² and only thirty-five percent of them live in countries with a free press.³



If those are our pictures of freedom, then we really are not free. Or are we? Let me answer that question by directing our attention away from the beach and the Bill of Rights to a different but related passage from Luke's gospel. Two chapters later in Luke, Jesus tells a large group of his disciples:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.”

Luke 6:20b-21a

There is a great temptation to misinterpret Jesus by making poverty and hunger (either material or spiritual) praiseworthy conditions that earn us a ticket into the kingdom of God. If that were true, then these passages would have very little to say about true freedom. Indeed, on this misinterpretation quite the opposite would be true: the kingdom that God intended to be free would now have a cost.

But that is not what Jesus is saying. These are not conditional statements, they are declarations. In Jesus, God proves that he is faithful, regardless; God's kingdom and the freedom it engenders are not contingent, but are given to us.

Indeed, the idea that the poor and the hungry are blessed is absolute nonsense – unless the God who blesses the poor and the hungry actually exists. But if that God exists, then why are we so busy chasing after so much bread? Why are we so desperate for just a few days of joy? The irony is so pronounced, it is a shock that we miss it: rather than producing freedom, wealth only seems to get in the way of true freedom. (And if you are reading this, let's face it: you probably are one of the wealthy.)

This takes us back to the ramshackle collection of houses made from tin, cardboard, and plywood. Or if you prefer, back out into a wilderness devoid of bread, but full of stones. In such places we learn a powerful lesson. True freedom comes not when we can do whatever we want, when we want to do it. True freedom comes not in our ability to accomplish this, that, or the other all by ourselves. True freedom is not in-dependence, but *in* dependence.

NOTES

1 Martin Ravallion, Shaohua Chen, and Prem Sangraula, "Dollar a Day Revisited," *Policy Research Working Paper WPS 4620* (Washington, DC: The World Bank Development Research Group, May 2008), 3. Available online at <http://econ.worldbank.org> (accessed February 19, 2011).

2 *Global Restrictions on Religion* (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, December 2009), 1. Available online at <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=491> (accessed February 19, 2011).

3 *Freedom of the Press 2010* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2010), 38. Available online at www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/pfs/371.pdf (accessed February 19, 2011).

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