

## **Galatians Sermon 4**

*Galatians 5:13-25*

The Christian communities in Galatia to whom Paul wrote his letter were apparently in stormy circumstances. It is not going too far to say that he thought the churches were in danger of sinking. We see that something was wrong when we read “if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” We also see from what Paul wrote that the Galatian churches had to deal with particular social and cultural issues. He lists such things as fornication, sorcery, drunkenness, and carousing. We do not know exactly what was going on in the Galatian communities, but we can see how Paul dealt with the issues that were bubbling in them.

In the first four and a half chapters of his letter Paul has hammered home the message that what Christ Jesus does for men and women is set them free. Through his death and resurrection Christ heals humanity’s brokenness and sin. Men and women are invited to accept that this is what Christ has done. To the extent that this occurs we have freedom. I want to explain what I think Paul was getting at more clearly if I can. What defines us as human beings is our being in the world; the world is our home. This is obvious in one sense. But although the world is the environment in which we live, we never feel completely ‘at home’ in it: we always feel insecure. One reason for this is that life is, as we all know, a fragile affair. A random event can change the rest of our lives. Much as we try, we cannot control everything. This leads to a deep-seated insecurity that is always present no matter how we try to overcome it or forget it. The gospel, according to Paul, is the news that this insecurity, the insecurity we cannot avoid, is taken up into Christ and overcome through his crucifixion and resurrection that is the dawn of God’s new creation. In short we are set free from that which we cannot free ourselves. Our security is in the resurrected life that Christ’s resurrection shows is God’s promise to us. For this reason Paul claims that those who are prepared to take the action of Christ Jesus with absolute seriousness are the most free of all people. That is why he writes “you were called to freedom brothers and sisters.” But how does Paul describe this freedom? In what concrete ways does this freedom show itself?

When commenting on the freedom that Christ gives, the theologian Jacques Ellul wrote that “the glorious liberty of the children of God is not the happy fluttering of a butterfly from one attractive flower to another.” What he meant by that is that our freedom in Christ is not the liberty to choose whatever we want whenever we want. Some people have suggested that we live in an age that elevates the freedom to choose to be the absolute good. Another theologian has suggested that for many people the content of what is chosen is irrelevant as long as there is always something to choose. Paul, on the other hand, says that the freedom we have in Christ is not an indiscriminate freedom: He says that freedom should not be understood as the liberty to choose anything.

According to Paul freedom is embodied by Christ Jesus. Paul was convinced that Christ freely chose the path he took. The choice that Christ Jesus made was to reject violence and manipulation as a way of starting God’s new social order. Christ’s freedom was embodied in his choice to love the enemy and the neighbour. If freedom took this shape in Christ, Paul argues, then freedom will take the same shape in us. What does this mean?

According to St Paul where our freedom in Christ leads us is to *responsibility*. The Oxford dictionary defines responsibility as having an *obligation* to care for someone. To the ears of modern people putting the words ‘freedom’ and ‘obligation’ together might sound contradictory but it is what Paul does. For Paul, Christ’s freedom shows itself as an obligation for the ultimate happiness of human beings. He accomplishes our ultimate happiness by his resurrection that is the promise of new life. He takes, in short, responsibility for us. In various ways this is a point that Paul makes again and again in his letters. If this is the case then the freedom we have from Christ should lead us to build just, peaceable, and compassionate communities in which people can have the time and space to know what Paul calls their joyous freedom in Christ. If doing this costs us as it may Paul says we can bear it because of our freedom Christ’s action has given us. Paul lived this freedom and so can we.