

St Mary's Dorchester, Sunday 22nd February 2026 – i.e. First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was thinking about freedom a lot in the run-up to Christmas this year. I preached about freedom at Midnight Mass. I was forming an idea – not a terribly original idea, I'm happy to admit – that part of why God sent his Son to be with us was *to make us free*.

“To make us free.” Notice I don't say that God sent his Son to “set us free”. There are plenty of things we need to be set free from, and Jesus definitely helps us with some of those. But “setting someone free” is a negative idea: it implies that there's something that needs to be changed or removed for us to be free. We're well acquainted with the negative picture of freedom; it's in everything from the reporting about the war in Ukraine to our science fiction. A negative picture of freedom is one of the few things that both the Left and the Right agree on. Whenever someone argues that life would be so much better without this person, or phenomenon, or institution, they're trading in that negative picture of freedom.

At Christmas I was more interested in a positive picture of freedom. Even when all the barriers to our freedom are removed, there is still some extra work that needs to be done. It isn't enough to save us from negative forces, within or without; we need to be *made* free. The Gospel reading we often have at Midnight Mass puts the point well. John the Evangelist is talking about the eternal Word of God; and he says that

...to all who received [the Word], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God... [John 1:12-13]

Becoming children of God isn't just about avoiding something, or defeating something. It's about growing and learning and choosing – it's like being born again [John 3:3 etc.]. “Becoming God's children” is a vision of freedom that demands something new. It's positive.

At Christmas time that all feels very abstract. We're thinking about possibilities, the kind of

possibilities you get when a new child is born. Christmas is a celebration of how someone like Jesus comes into the world, someone who combines the perfect creative freedom of God with the messiness of a human life. But later in Jesus' story we see the rubber starting to hit the road.

In three out of four canonical Gospels we meet the adult Jesus for the first time as he gets baptised by his cousin John. Immediately afterwards – again, in three out of the four Gospels – Jesus is led, or driven, by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he is tempted by the devil [Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13]. And what was just an abstract set of possibilities at Christmas begins to take concrete shape.

On the face of it, the devil appears to be offering Jesus a picture of freedom. Imagine a world where you don't have to be hungry, the devil says. Imagine that you could do impossible things – like throwing yourself off the top of the temple, for example – and not have to worry about the consequences. Imagine having all the power and riches in the world, so that everything and everyone belonged to you. In Jesus' position most people living today would see the devil's offer as aspirational, the sort of thing that would make them more free. According to most of the principles that govern our modern life Jesus' refusal seems irrational. He is refusing progress; he is refusing freedom.

Jesus' responses make more sense if we adopt a positive picture of freedom. In Advent I mentioned how one feature of positive freedom is unpredictability. By unpredictability I don't just mean the ability to make random choices; I'm thinking of the way that relationship and virtue lead people to find unexpected solutions to problems. Free people build bridges, they imagine a better world than the one they started in, and so they make things better for themselves and others.

The devil wants Jesus to be predictable. Notice how in two of the three temptations there is literally a gravitational pull. The devil doesn't suggest an impromptu skydiving session while Jesus is sitting on a rock in the desert: he actually puts him on the pinnacle [Matthew 4:5]. The devil doesn't talk about the kingdoms of the world in the abstract: he finds a very high mountain, from which Jesus can actually look down on those kingdoms [v. 8]. The devil wants Jesus to feel moral vertigo; he wants him to feel the pull of gravity, and in the same way he wants to make the tempting choice seem inevitable. But Jesus resists the devil's downward logic. He is unpredictable; he's free.

Another feature of the positive freedom I'm talking about is factuality. Free people don't live in a fantasy world, they inform themselves and base their choices on the facts, whether they are pleasant

or not. When scientific truth and journalistic integrity get eroded, freedom is a casualty. So is it a coincidence that each of the temptations the devil offers Jesus are, in their own ways, a denial of reality? If scripture is to be believed, Jesus is the one through whom the stones of that wilderness were made. The devil invites Jesus to unmake them: to turn something that was a perfectly good stone into something else, to serve his own purposes. The devil invites Jesus to deny normal processes of cause and effect: gravity is for the little people, you can fly if you want to. The devil wants Jesus to worship someone who is not God as if he were. By refusing, Jesus commits himself to living in the same world as the rest of us.

The final feature of positive freedom I'm going to mention now is solidarity. Free people know that what affects one person will always affect others. It isn't possible for one group to enjoy great luxury without another group suffering injustice; there is no lasting peace while someone is being victimised. At their best, the great reforming movements of the modern world have known this truth about solidarity, even if they haven't always applied it consistently. With this in mind, notice that the devil approaches Jesus while he is alone; the temptations on offer are choices that would make Jesus even more isolated. Take the example of bread: all four Evangelists tell stories about Jesus producing miraculous bread during his ministry. But when Jesus does this, it is never just for himself. He does it for the benefit of others, and literal bread becomes a symbol of spiritual food. So also with the temptation to accept angelic protection and worldly authority: choices that would set Jesus apart from the people he came to live with and to save. Instead Jesus chooses solidarity: he chooses to be with us through thick and thin.

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Christians spend a lot of time thinking about why Jesus chooses to live and die the way he does. That's especially true around this time of the year. Many of our theologies of atonement revolve around pictures of freedom: freedom from sin, freedom from the devil, freedom from death. All worthwhile goals, to be sure; all good things. But you'll notice they're all negative pictures of freedom. When we're free from sin, free from the power of the devil, free from death, what then? What are we hoping to become? And how does Jesus help?

Here, at the beginning of Lent, we have certain clues. The freedom Jesus calls us to will be unpredictable: sin calls us to abandon the narrow way, to take the wide and easy downward path. But we are called to pick out a path among rough and difficult terrain, a path that will take us ever higher. The freedom Jesus calls us to will be informed by facts. Christianity is not a utopian

movement: it is grounded in the world as it is, even if we are called to imagine and build a better one. And the freedom Jesus calls us to is one of solidarity. Salvation is not privilege of this or that group at the expense of others: Jesus came to save the world [John 3:16-17].

Heavenly Father,
your Son battled with the powers of darkness
and grew closer to you in the desert:
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer
that we may witness to your saving love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.