

Guernsey, Liberation Day 2022

A sermon preached by the Rt Revd and Rt Hon Lord Chartres GCVO at the Town Church in St Peter Port, Guernsey on Liberation Day, 9 May 2022

At 7-14 am on this very day in 1945 the surrender was signed on the quarterdeck of HMS Bulldog. A small advance party of British troops disembarked and the Union Jack was hoisted. It was one day after the declaration of Victory in Europe and the end of five years of occupation.

The Second World War was fought in the name of “freedom”, an ideal spelled out by President Roosevelt in 1941.

“In the future days which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded on four essential freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want. The fourth is freedom from fear.”

Those words were certainly resonant here in 1941. It was the second year of the occupation of Guernsey by an alien regime which denied freedom of speech, persecuted Jews even here, presided over serious food shortages on what had been a prosperous island and ruled by pervasive fear, inflicting savage punishments and reprisals at the least sign of resistance.

There have been many books about the occupation and judgements passed mostly with the benefit of hindsight. I have been particularly moved therefore by the diaries of Violet Carey published in 2009. They were written and concealed day by day when she could not know the end of the story. Cut off from her children who were serving off island as part of the war effort [and 10% of the population of Guernsey served in the forces in WWII], she expresses on occasion an “utter feeling of desolation”. As she writes, “Unless one has experienced it personally no one can imagine what it is like to be under German occupation. Prisoners completely in their power.” But at the same time there is humour and confidence even in the darkest days that Liberation and Victory would come in the end.

She describes the deportations and the food shortages which worsened in the final 11 months of occupation as the allies made progress on the Continent and command in the Bailiwick passed to a fanatical Nazi.

Just a few remain who witnessed the first Liberation Day but we can imagine the relief and exuberant celebration with which that first landing party was welcomed. It is right that we remember and celebrate today.

We cannot change the past but we are responsible for how we remember it, especially at a time when the freedoms described by Roosevelt are under threat and in another part of Europe, people like us are once again being exposed to a war, the horrors of which recall the worst days of World War II.

There are some resonant words from our first lesson “Live as those who are free but do not use your freedom as a cloak for wrong doing; live as slaves in God’s service.”

The New Testament sets a high value on freedom. Jesus himself exhibited a remarkable degree of freedom from conventions. He was religious teacher but neither an academic nor an ascetic. Foxes had holes but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. He had no fixed

home and ate with all and sundry. He was unusually open to children and women, even Samaritans.

But by contrast some versions of Christianity have been highly controlling and even coercive. There is a dramatic picture in Dostoevsky's novel "Brothers Karamazov" of a confrontation between Jesus and a representative of the ecclesiastical hierarchy which claimed to rule in his name. Jesus is silent while the Cardinal Inquisitor General reproaches him for a lack of compassion for the spiritually second rate. "I tell you that man has no more tormenting care than to find someone to whom he can hand over as quickly as possible that gift of freedom with which the miserable creature is born." In the end maintaining his silence Christ simply kisses the old man on the lips and melts into the crowd.

In 17th century England after the abolition of censorship and the breakdown of episcopal and royal government there was an orgy of destructive fanaticism. Even the revolutionary poet John Milton was moved to declare that "Liberty hath a sharp and double edge fit only to be handled by just and virtuous men."

In our own day the phenomenon of ideologically or religiously inspired terrorism has forced us to think again about the limits of freedom.

Contemplating the devastation of Europe and especially the despoiling of this island in 1945, the evil of coercive ideologies and regimes was appallingly clear. In consequence in the post war period there were efforts to enshrine in international law protection for the freedom of the individual from external oppression. The cry of the prophet Isaiah still needs to be heard today in the context of the vastly enhanced power of the modern state to control every aspect of our lives. "Proclaim liberty to the captives and let the oppressed go free."

Christians have been allies in this campaign but the Christian tradition also looks for liberation from enslavement to inner dispositions which express themselves in various kinds of addiction to alcohol, drugs, status, sex and money. All these arise from a deficiency in self-giving love and cannot be cured by simple prohibitions.

Christian freedom rejoices in the emancipation of the individual from dependence and the entry into independence. But freedom should not stop at freedom **from** external constraint and various forms of external enslavement. It should lead on to freedom **for** self-giving love without any hidden agendas or possessiveness. **Dependence** should give way to **independence** which is the essential pre-condition for the creative **interdependence** of loving relationships.

Sometimes this will mean abridging individual freedoms in the wider interests of society. Guernsey during the pandemic accepted this kind of restriction of individual liberty to protect our neighbours from deadly disease. We should be watchful however that the new magisterium does not develop an excessive taste for minute surveillance of our lives.

The alternative to freedom is not only external coercion but an inner condition in which we are the slaves of destructive addictions or immobilised by fear. The risk averse life is just as diminished as the life in thrall to narcotics.

Christian freedom rejects determinism and holds that choice is a moral reality. We are commanded to "live as those that are free, but not to use our freedom as a cloak for wrong doing but live as slaves in God's service."

The New Testament version of liberation embraces freedom **from** coercion **and** freedom **for** loving relationships. The service of God as we see him in his human face Jesus Christ leads to a radical decentring, away from a preoccupation with our-selves and a liberation into self-giving generous love. Paradoxically his service is perfect freedom. Judging from Violet Carey's diary, life under occupation for many people heightened their down to earth appreciation of the virtue of neighbourliness. It was and is the vital moral basis for community life. Wartime conditions exposed very dramatically the consequences of falling short.

The 20th century saw the defeat [although who can say for how long] of race centred fascism and class centred communism. On this Liberation Day it is a time for asking how we have spent the peace, purchased at the cost of much suffering and many lives.

In our own time there are different challenges. The re-shaping of the world as little more than a global market-place, has involved a careless attitude to the sacred gift of life and the health of our planet. How can imaginations and desires shaped by advertising and exclusively economic imperatives be free to find delight and fulfilment in the renewal of our relationships - with the depth of our own lives, our relationship with our neighbours and our relationship with the nature we have sought to dominate but which in reality nourishes us.

"Live as those who are free but do not use your freedom as a cloak for wrong doing; live as servants of God."

This is the central struggle of our time. We do not choose the times in which we live but we are responsible for how we spend the time we are given. Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in one lifetime but we are responsible for harvesting the best of what has gone before and bequeathing a living hope to those who come after. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone but we are responsible for making our unique contribution to the general effort.

I rejoice in the determination of this island and Bailiwick to preserve your independence and ancient insular traditions. You have never been a colony or a part of the UK. You have been loyal to the Crown while resisting assimilation to larger political entities. Ignorance of this fact and attempts to subordinate the islands to England have regularly led to "bedlam in the bailiwicks". For five years you endured occupation and since the war you have re-built a prosperous society and erased most of the scars of the attempt to turn you into Hitler's Atlantic prison. There is much to thank God for in Sarnia Cherie but the question for today is how as individuals and as a community we are using the freedom which cost so much. "Live as those who are free but do not use your freedom as a cloak for wrong doing; live as servants of God."

+Richard Chartres