

Truth and Freedom in Christ's Word
Sermon for Reformation Sunday 2019
John 8:31-36

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel for today, John 8:31-36: ³¹ **Therefore, Jesus said to those Jews who had become believers in Him, "If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."**

³³ **They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been in slavery to anyone. How do You mean, 'You will be made free'?"**

³⁴ **Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I tell you that everyone who keeps on committing sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the family for ever. The son remains for ever. ³⁶ Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you will certainly be free."**

LORD God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Truth and freedom are two things that are precious to us. We want others to tell us true statements, not lies. We want what we hear on the radio, see on television, or read in newspapers to be true - not some fake news that only serves to make controversy. We talk about truth in advertising. We want products to do exactly as they're advertised to do. We want to learn the truth about certain historical events - what really happened, and as Australians, we value our freedom. We treasure the freedom to worship without persecution from the government, the freedom to vote for the candidate of our choice, the freedom to travel when we want, and so forth. We value our freedom especially when we think of those living in countries with oppressive governments. Yes, truth and freedom are both precious. People have fought and died for the sake of one or the other, and sometimes for both together.

Our text for this Reformation service deals with *truth and freedom*. Jesus says, **"If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."** The word "truth" does not simply signify the ordinary meaning of the word or some sort of philosophical concept. No, Jesus talks about *the* truth - the ultimate truth, the highest truth, the truth that is of greatest importance for every human being. The Reformation led by Martin Luther was concerned with this truth. In our text, Jesus speaks of truth, and what He says is that **"the truth will make you free."**

Tied in with *the* truth are the matters of spiritual freedom and slavery, of everlasting life and everlasting death. From John's Gospel we see that the truth that makes free *is needed by all*, and that this truth is *the Word of Christ*.

Every single human being needs *the* truth that makes free. This truth shows us reality - spiritual reality: that there is a God and who this God is, and that there is a heaven and a hell. It tells about man by nature being spiritually lost, and about the way to everlasting life. It follows that all who do not have and believe *the* truth, have and believe what is not the truth, namely, what is untrue, deceptive, and false. What they believe in is *unreality*; it's not the way things really are. They are kidding themselves, going along a path that will end - to their horror - in everlasting torment in hell.

Today in our country, thanks to multi-culturalism, there are several religious and philosophical systems. Perhaps the fastest growing of them all with the most members is atheism. Many Australians too are very agnostic in their views of religion, which often makes them clueless. That is why you will often hear such people exclaim, "*it really doesn't matter what a person believes as long as he or she is sincere in that belief*," or, "*there are different roads to heaven*." When people speak this way, they are really asking us to accept what is untrue, to recognise gods that do not exist. The people holding to these religious or philosophical systems are believing *falsehood*.

Today we find Jesus speaking to a crowd of Jews. Many of the Jews in that crowd were led to believe *the* truth. There were those who did not believe *the* truth, however; they rejected this truth that sets free, because they felt they already knew all that mattered. They thought they already were free, *heirs of salvation*, because, to quote their own words, **"We are Abraham's descendants."** Since they were part of God's chosen people, with whom God had made

His covenant in the days of the patriarchs and Moses, they felt they had never been in spiritual bondage to anyone or anything. They were not slaves of idols like the Gentiles were; they lived outwardly good lives and were free, so they thought, from the corruption that marked the public lives of those Gentiles.

They were fooling themselves; the simple fact that they were Abraham's physical seed would not save them. Being Abraham's descendants did not mean automatic acceptance in God's kingdom. No one can get to heaven by virtue of the faith or piety of his ancestors. John the Baptist once warned the Pharisees and Sadducees, who prided themselves in being Abraham's descendants, "*Do not think that you can tell yourselves, 'Abraham is our father'! For I tell you that God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones*" (Matthew 3:9). Just as God had made Adam out of the dust of the ground¹ and had made Eve from Adam's rib², so He could also make children of Abraham out of the stones of the desert if He so desired. Furthermore, the unbelieving Jews were not as good as they thought they were.

Martin Luther, in the early part of his life, was living under a false concept of reality; he did not have the truth that would make him free. As a monk in the Roman Catholic Church, he was taught, and he believed, that a person *could earn* God's favour and salvation by performing good works. Therefore, Luther felt that his salvation depended on *what he did*, that he had to win his salvation, that everything depended on his efforts. But this is not the way a person is saved. Luther was operating under a false concept of God and salvation.

These examples show that the truth that makes free is needed by all, for those who do not have this truth have what is not true. They are controlled by, they are slaves of, falsehood, of unreality.

At the bottom of this belief in falsehood, and of falsehood itself, is the fact that all people are sinful. Falsehood and belief in falsehood are simply manifestations of people's sinful nature. The Bible says, "*Certainly there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins*" (Eccl. 7:20). No one is without sin. This included the unbelieving Jews in Jesus' day; this included Martin Luther; this includes you and me.

Jesus says, moreover, that "**everyone who keeps on committing sin is a slave of sin.**" Not only are people sinful, but left to themselves, they are ruled by sin; they are helpless before sin and cannot break away from sin. Jesus' phrase "**committing sin**" includes all forms of sin: wrong acts, leaving undone what should be done, bad thoughts, ungodly words. No one left to himself or herself is righteous before God; no one can earn salvation. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death³; this includes everlasting death, damnation in hell forever. Therefore, all need the truth that makes free because all, left to themselves, are **slave(s) of sin**. Luther was tormented by the realisation that no matter how good he tried to be, he still sinned, and that he could never do enough to earn God's favour. He knew he was a slave of sin, and so he feared that he could never be saved.

The truth that is so desperately needed, this truth that makes one free, is the Word of Christ. Broadly speaking, all of Scripture is the Word of Christ. This Word reveals the true God, the triune God; it reveals spiritual reality. It includes both Law and Gospel. The Law shows people their sin and their need for the Saviour. But particularly with our text today from John, we are concerned with the Gospel - the Word of Christ, which is the liberating truth. This truth the Son of God revealed to the prophets of the Old Testament. This truth He spoke during His earthly ministry. This truth He continued to speak through His apostles and still speaks to us today through the writings of His prophets and apostles.

This Word of Christ, His teaching, is about Christ. The truth, the spiritual reality, is that God the Father has sent His Son to be the Substitute for every human being. The Son of God became a man. This God-man, Jesus Christ, lived a perfect life for each of us. He also took all our sins upon Himself and made total payment for these sins by His suffering and death on a cross. Three days later God raised Him from the dead, thereby indicating that He had fully accepted Christ's sacrifice for us. Jesus Christ has redeemed the whole world; He has made full atonement for all people's sins.

Through faith in Jesus, which God works and preserves in us *through the Gospel*, we have forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. We do absolutely nothing for our salvation; it is totally a gift of God. The Bible says, "*For by grace*

¹ Genesis 2:7

² Genesis 2:22

³ Romans 6:23

you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Through His Gospel Word, then, through "**the truth,**" the Son of God makes people free. This is why it can also be said that "**the truth will make you free.**" The Gospel truth reveals Jesus and His work of salvation; through the Gospel, He comes to a person and makes that person a believer in Him, Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.⁴ When a person believes in Christ, he is freed from being a slave to spiritual falsehood, freed from believing in unreality. As believers, we do not live life under a delusion, but we have a true understanding of God and salvation.

Through faith in Christ, we are freed, as well, from being **slave(s) of sin**. We are freed from the *guilt* of sin. Again, we have forgiveness for all our sins. Through faith in Christ, we have received the righteousness Christ has acquired for everyone with His perfect life and innocent suffering and death, and so are declared righteous, or are justified, by God. We heard Paul earlier say, "*For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law*" (Romans 3:28).

In addition, through faith in Christ, we are freed from the *power* of sin. Paul also writes in Romans, "*So you too, reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus!*"¹² *Therefore let sin not keep on reigning in your mortal bodies with the result that you obey their sinful desires!*"¹³ *Stop presenting the parts of your bodies to sin as weapons of unrighteousness! Rather, present yourselves to God, as people who are alive from the dead, and present the parts of your bodies to God as weapons of righteousness!*"¹⁴ *For sin will not be master over you. For you are not under Law, but under grace*" (Romans 6:11-14). With Christ, motivated and empowered by Him through His Word and Sacraments, we are able to defeat sin, overcome sin, and gain more and more victories over sin. In spiritual union with Christ, each one of us can lead a God-glorifying life, a life that ever increases in fruit for the Lord.

Finally, Jesus told those Jews who believed in Him, and He tells you and me today, "**If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples,**"³² **and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.**" We are to abide in Christ's Word, the truth; we are to keep on reading the Word, hearing it, studying it, and partaking of the Word visualised, the Lord's Supper. This is a mark of truly being a disciple of Jesus. Some believe in Jesus for a while, but then they lose contact with His Word and as a result fall from faith and back into slavery. Jesus wants us who are free to remain in His Word, in the truth, so that we shall continue to know and believe the truth, so that the truth will continue to keep us free.

Therefore, let us abide in the truth. We do this with our own private devotions, our family devotions, our being in a Bible class, or our attending congregational worship services. Through regular, meaningful contact with the truth, we shall be spiritually strengthened, as a result of which we shall exercise more and more our power over sin, so that our fruit-bearing for the Lord will increase. Remaining in Christ's Word, we shall not take the truth for granted. Remember, for a number of centuries it was to a large extent lost and then was recovered by Luther. We shall do all we can to support the true preaching and teaching of God's Word and see to it that this will continue. Remaining in Christ's Word, we shall be ever ready to share, in humility and love, the truth with others, believers and unbelievers alike. May this be our goal - to share the truth with someone who is an unbeliever, as God provides the opportunity. Remaining in Christ's Word, His truth, we shall at last be ushered into the splendour of heaven, that great liberation, and will, on the Last Day, receive our glorified resurrection bodies.

Today, in this Reformation service, we rejoice that, by God's grace, Martin Luther recovered "the truth" - Christ's Word, the Gospel. All who do not know and believe the truth are slaves - of falsehood and their own sin. Tragically, they are headed for everlasting damnation. But we and all others who have faith in Christ are free indeed! For this, we thank our gracious, loving God!

May we abide in the truth, Christ's Word, and may we share His Word, the truth, with others, for **the truth will make you free!** Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

⁴ John 14:6

PRAYER FOR THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Lord God almighty, we praise You for calling us by the Gospel into the glorious company of the saints, into the Church of Jesus Christ. We praise You for Your kindness to us, and for Your continual care of Your Church. Continue to protect Your people from the attacks of Satan and from all enemies of Your Word and will.

We praise You especially that, when the Church was weakened by the false words and misguided wisdom of men, You freed and revived it by Your grace and goodness. When people had tampered with the Gospel that we are justified through faith in Christ, without doing what Your Law requires, You once again restored the Gospel. Through Your Holy Spirit You raised up people of courage, and faith, who led Your people back to the living truth of Your Word, and restored to them the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Grant that we may continue in Christ by continuing in His Word, which makes us free.

Protect Your Church today from every false way. Liberate us from all false teachings that reject or corrupt the Gospel of free grace in Christ. Rid the Church of all half-heartedness, love of this world, fear of ridicule, and persecution of the truth. Renew and strengthen it for Your gracious purposes. Preserve each one of us in faith in Your Son, through which we are justified in Your sight. Grant that we may continually trust in Your loving kindness, receive the peace of Your free pardon, and live by the Spirit in faith, hope, and love. Send out workers into Your harvest to preach Your pure, unchanging Gospel to all nations, and richly bless Your Word.

Look kindly on the nations of the world, and especially on our own. Give those who govern us love of the truth, warmth of heart, and purity of mind, that they may serve our country faithfully on Your behalf. Let Your light shine in countryside and city, that people everywhere may come to know You and turn to You in repentance and faith.

Look upon us with compassion and send bountiful rain to revive the parched land.

God of all comfort, we commend to Your loving care our homes and families, and all people in every situation and circumstance. Be the refuge and strength of all, always ready to help in times of trouble.

Bless us daily with Your Spirit so that we may always trust in Your grace alone to save us, through Jesus Christ Your Son. Finally receive us into Your eternal presence, where we shall serve and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

Reformation Day

Revelation 14:6-7

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying in the zenith of the sky. He had the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every nation, tribe, language and people. ⁷ He was saying with a loud voice: "Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour has come for Him to judge. Worship Him who has made the heaven, the earth, the sea and the springs of water!"

Romans 3:19-28

¹⁹ We know that, whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore, no human being will be justified in His sight by doing what the Law says. For through the Law comes the recognition of sin.

²¹ Now, however, the righteousness of God apart from the Law has been made known, and the Law and the Prophets testify to it. ²² It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference. ²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ²⁴ They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God has publicly displayed Him as the propitiatory-cover

through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because He had let go unpunished the sins that had been committed in the past, ²⁶ in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.

²⁷ Therefore, where is boasting? It has been excluded. Through what principle? Through the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded through the principle of faith. ²⁸ For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.

John 8:31-36

³¹ Therefore, Jesus said to those Jews who had become believers in Him, "If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

³³ They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been in slavery to anyone. How do You mean, 'You will be made free'?"

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I tell you that everyone who keeps on committing sin is a slave of sin.

³⁵ The slave does not remain in the family for ever. The son remains for ever. ³⁶ Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you will certainly be free."