

1 Peter 2:2 "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation"

John 14:13-14 "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

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

So the question I want to ask today is, what do you want? If you could have anything what would it be?

From John 14 we heard this morning, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." in response to this, there might be a temptation to think, 'oh goody goody, well Lord, I'd like a Ferrari, a private jet and my own private island in the Caribbean'. Or perhaps your thoughts might turn to more pressing matters, better health, or simply freedom from the lockdown. Fortunately, and it is fortunately, this is not what Jesus is talking about in our reading today.

We are living through a period of a rather extreme deprivation of personal liberty, we cannot do the things that we normally take for granted. Just getting in a car and driving somewhere risks an interrogation by the police and a fine. So, freedom and liberty are live issues to us at this time. Because our normal way of doing things has been, shall we say, revised, it should make us stop and think about what freedom actually means. As a slight digression, it is worth saying how truly grateful I am that I do not live in a city flat. 10 years ago, I lived in what can be best described as an overpriced cupboard in South London, the bed folded out one way, and the table the other; there was not enough room for both at the same time. I thank the Lord daily that I have the freedom to go outside and to metaphorically swing as many cats as I would like.

Returning to our subject, Christ's offer of 'anything' is a call, first and foremost, to freedom. The freedom that comes from Christ is not the same as the freedom offered to us by society, but it is certainly a much better form of it. There is a very old saying which some of you may have heard, which in goes something like, 'you can have whatever you want, but are you disciplined enough to be free?' That may, at first glance, seem a bit contradictory, but it makes real sense, as without discipline, we are enslaved to other forces. Imagine an all you can eat buffet, with all of your favourite foods and more besides, the question of what you do depends on what you allow to 'control' your actions. If greed takes over, you may well overeat to the point of making yourself ill. If, however, vanity takes over, you may go hungry. Neither option seems particularly 'free'.

True freedom, freedom we find in Christ, is a freedom to not be controlled by our desires, but the freedom from all the cares and concerns of this world, from all the things that hold us back and weigh us down. Freedom in Christ is governed by our relationship and response to Him. From 1 Peter we heard, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation". That is a very powerful image of where our desire ought to be. We should be desiring pure spiritual milk, that is, ultimately a desire to be with and close to Christ. Notice 1 Peter speaks of growing into salvation, this is echoed in St Paul in 1 Corinthians with the idea of 'being saved', the sense of our salvation being a continuous process that we have to engage in and keep renewing our commitment to. We can't simply think 'great I've been saved, now I can do something else'. Salvation is something we work at, not in a 'works' type way, but simply in a constant

engagement with Christ. It is also something that needs to be at the forefront of our minds, because our true freedom comes through our salvation.

Freedom, real freedom, is freedom from sin. Sin holds us back, it makes us less than we could be, it warps our identity and causes us to look inwardly at ourselves alone. Our freedom and indeed our liberty come not from a new car, or other material possessions, or even our ability to go about our normal activities. Our freedom comes through our relationship with Christ alone. If you think back to my first question of what you truly want, the question to ask is what exactly is driving your desire? When Christ says “**I will do whatever you ask in my name**”, it is a call and a challenge for us. Christ will do whatever we ask, but it needs to be in his name. So I am sorry to say, it is very unlikely that a desire for a Ferrari, or even a new Massey Ferguson is going to be in Christ’s name. If we align ourselves truly with Christ, then our desires will be in line with his will for our lives, and so we will find our fulfilment wholly in him.

Our first reading today was the story of the stoning of Stephen. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Stephen’s accusation is that the people of Israel rejected the Holy Spirit, that they have failed to follow the Law of God. Stephen’s testimony, of course, leads to his stoning. But Stephen’s response to it is remarkable, and it is one marked by the true freedom found in Christ, ‘**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit**’, he calls, and then, most extraordinarily ‘**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**’ Stephen is able in spite of his situation, to remain focused entirely on Christ, he is set free from the cares and concerns of this world and accepts his death as the point at which he will meet with Christ. Stephen is a rather extreme example, but one that shows where our true freedom lies.

So as the lockdown continues, remember that we seek our freedom in Christ alone and not in the empty promises of this world. Our true freedom comes in our union with our saviour, who will give us anything we ask of him.

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