

## **“Free from and free for” John 8:31-36**

**“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, “You will become free?”” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”**

Today we celebrate 498 anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Before we get to our today’s Gospel reading we will take a brief look at what the Reformation was and why would we still celebrate it here in Australia even 500 years later.

People often misunderstand what the Reformation was, and think that it is about something along the lines of ever-continuing progress, where we are becoming smarter and smarter.

Then they say that the Church needs to be reformed all the time, by that meaning that the Church needs to change all the time, that Christ’s Church needs to catch up with the times, to be on ‘the right side of history’, so to speak.

The best way to understand what the Reformation was, is to look at its very opposite, which is – de-formation. Reformation is when you reform, restore back something that has been deformed.

In the case of the Lutheran Reformation it was Christ’s message that was deformed. The Church had become so much like the world around it, that the unique message of Jesus Christ was almost completely lost.

There was a man, chosen by God, and called to recover the true message of the Bible, his name was Martin Luther. He didn’t mean to become a reformer. He didn’t plan to start the greatest revival ever.

He didn’t mean to launch the Reformation and to change the course of history. When Luther began to read the Bible, when he began to abide in Christ’s words, trying to be Jesus’ disciple, words of Christ revealed him the truth and the truth set him free.

Free. Freedom. This is what Martin Luther obtained. True freedom which comes from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ through His Word. And as Luther proclaimed and taught this freedom to others, the world was changed.

The impact of Christ’s message was far more greater than anyone could imagine. No wonder that many of Luther’s colleagues and contemporaries believe that he indeed was the angel from Rev 14, sent to proclaim to us the eternal Gospel.

This is what the Reformation was about. Returning to the Word of God, abiding in the Word, restoring the pure message of Christ, learning the truth and letting its transforming power to set us free.

I think that most people really like this word ‘freedom’ and ideas related to it. Unfortunately what we often understand as freedom is something very, very different than what Jesus had in mind and what the Reformation rediscovered.

How do we, or at least how does the culture around us understand what freedom is? I think that we all are influenced by this fairy tale that we can’t be truly happy unless we are totally free to choose who we are and how we want to live.

This idea, this story has been around for so long and is still actively promoted. Just a few examples of this kind of thinking, of how people understand this freedom, and I’m sure you will recognize most of them.

‘I want to be free to do whatever I want. I want to be free from all restrictions, from all authorities and responsibilities, from all obligations that I haven’t chosen myself.

I want to be free to define who I am. I want to be free to define who God is and what to do about it. I want to be free to decide myself what is right and what is wrong. I want to be free to call the reality around me the way I want.’

I’m sure you can recognize examples of this freedom around us in our culture, even among people close to you, may be even in your own thinking. So many today are captivated by this false idea of freedom even not realizing it.

What is significant about this false freedom is that all of this is about... about whom? Yes, it is about me. This false freedom assures that I am the centre around whom everything else revolves; contrary to the obvious.

It takes just a minute to recognize that we are not creators of our lives, we didn’t decide when, where and with what genes we will be born. We didn’t choose our talents and weaknesses, we didn’t choose our relatives and opportunities that we have. We didn’t choose most of our relationships and responsibilities which define who we are. All of this was given to us.

And still people want to assume that I am the beginning and the end. That it is all about me. Of course, no one can make the entire world to revolve around them, but at least we do our best according to how much power and influence we have.

The irony about this false freedom of ‘me’ is, that, in fact, it is the greatest despot that enslaves us. We are enslaved to focus mostly on ourselves, to think and care mostly about ourselves, to worry about our future, we are bound to follow our desires, and we are tricked to believe that if we do it, this is freedom. When in fact

this false freedom doesn't allow us to be who we are created to be, to live and enjoy our lives in their richness.

In ancient Greek devil was called diabolos, which literary means, one who mixes things up, creates confusions, deceives. This is what he has done, he has persuaded us that our slavery is freedom, so that we would demand more of it.

And don't be fooled thinking that we as Christians are immune to this kind of deception. Not at all. Let's look at some examples and see whether they seem familiar or not.

In today's Gospel Jesus said: **"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** Jesus tells us what it means to be His disciples and what blessings it will give us.

Now let's reflect on our own thinking. Do we really want to allow Jesus Christ to determine what it means to be a Christian, or we want to determine it ourselves?

I see it again and again that we want to define ourselves what it means to be a Christian. Because, you know, we all are such mature adults and we should make up our own minds, how to go about this business of faith.

Then some chose to believe that to be a Christian mainly means that you need to be in the Divine Service as often as you can. On the other hand it doesn't matter much how you live your life between Sundays, as long as you have been to the Service.

Others choose to believe the very opposite. They believe that being in the Divine Service really doesn't matter for that's what these first, these hypocrites do. What matters for them is how good you are in your daily life. Of course, good according you own criteria of goodness.

Some chose to believe that they can be good disciples of Christ if they live as nice and loving persons, and try to help others. There really is no need to focus on the Bible and what it teaches, it doesn't really matter. Just be a loving person. For at the end all these religions are the same, aren't they?

Some believe that to be a Christian means that you are self-satisfied and don't need much. Then you can look at others who strive for more from this world, and condemn them, for you are not like them. You are happy and content with what you have. We could continue this list on and on...

I'm sure we can recognize that these ideas live not only among people we know, but also among us. The bottom line again is the same – it is all about me. It is 'me' who is going to decide what God should expect from me. At the end it is about what I myself choose.

When I ask where do people get these ideas... there is no answer. 'I decided, I choose to believe this way.' It is not a freedom. It is a slavery. Slavery to self, to the self which continually rebels against true God and wants to be like god.

This is why we have such an apathy to the Word of God, this is why we don't want to read it, or to study it, to listen to it, or to understand it. For if you listen to the Word of God, our false freedom is taken away. Then we stand before the Creator and Redeemer as His little rebellious creatures.

This is why we want to decide ourselves what it means to be Christ's disciples, then we are free to do whatever we want. It is quite convenient to be a nice and loving person in a way I choose to do it, according my rules.

It is much harder to admit that all is not about me, that I can't re-define reality or determine what is right and what is wrong, but God the Creator does it and I'm supposed to listen to Him and live accordingly.

We all are so, so deformed in our hearts. We are born this way and as we grow we get only worse. This is why we confess: "We are born sinful and unclean..." Deformed.

Jesus said: **"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** The Lutheran Reformation started with the Word of God, with Luther abiding in the Word. In these few words Jesus reveals what is the recipe for true reformation.

Every true reformation should start with the Word of God, when we are willing to listen to our Lord, instead of being like little gods ourselves. We don't read the Bible to study God. We read it for this is how our God speaks to us.

When you read and meditate upon the Word of God, at home, in the Divine Service, or in Bible studies, Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself speaks to you. He sends His Spirit together with His words to enlighten you, to show you the truth and to set you free.

Only when you come closer to Christ through His word, you begin to see the truth, about yourselves and about this world. Sometimes we think that mature Christians are those who don't sin, or sin just a little.

Mature Christians are those who understand the truth about our sinfulness and total dependence of God's grace. The more you abide in the Word, the more it shows the darkness of our hearts, and the more we can rejoice and appreciate what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Everything we receive from Him is totally underserved. If God was only just, we would all be condemned for hell and destruction. It is because of His

incomprehensible grace and love, it is because of Jesus sacrifice, that we have our hope. And what a hope it is!

God has chosen you for eternal life All your sins are forgiven!! The Holy Spirit has created you a new heart! He has made you a child of God the Father! You are an heir of God's eternal kingdom! The truth is that we don't deserve any of this.

The truth is that God loves each of you so much that He gives His life in exchange to yours, so that only He could be with you. So that only He can have you in His presence in His eternal Kingdom. This is our hope, this is the truth.

This is the truth which Jesus reveals us in His word, and this truth, indeed, sets you free. Jesus sets you free in two ways. First, He sets you free *from*. Second, He sets you free *for*.

First, most importantly, He sets you free *from* the false freedom of self. The Holy Spirit enlightens you and helps you to see that this is not all about you. We are free to turn our eyes from ourselves to Jesus and to our neighbours.

Second, Jesus sets you free *for*. He sets your hearts free, so that you desire what is truly good. He sets you free to trust that you are created in God's own image, that Jesus Christ has died and risen so that you can live eternally.

He sets you free to trust that your God loves you and cares for you, and there is nothing to worry about. He is your rock, and your shield. Jesus sets you free to enjoy your humanity.

To live in joyful and fulfilling relationships with your Creator and Redeemer, and because we trust that He provides for us, we are also free to live self-sacrificially for our neighbours. We are set free from all deformation, and we are set free to be reformed and restored, to be prepared for all good works.

This is what the Reformation was about, and this is why it is still as important for us, as it was for the people five centuries ago. We all need to abide in the Word of God as much as we need the air. We need the Word to reveal us the truth and to set us free. This is why we always need to be reformed.

Today we still are blessed, we still have the same Word of truth being preached, but don't take it for granted. Abide in this Word, learn the truth and be set free, or as Jesus said: "Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you." (John 12:35) Happy Reformation Day!

Amen.