

Free from the Past: Exodus 2.11-3.21

Team Talk 1

Ice-breaker/Discussion

Get into groups of four, introduce yourselves, and see what is the most unusual thing that you all have in common. (e. g. None of you have been on a plane, all of you have flown a plane, you all have uncles called Tony, you're all allergic to garlic, etc.)

Now, in your fours, ask yourselves what do Moses, David and the apostle Paul all have in common.

Introduction

- a) Introduce this talk for the evening and the theme

This term we are looking at the theme of freedom. Paul says, 'It was for freedom that Christ has set us free.' Freedom is what the Christian life is all about. It is the purpose for which Jesus came: to set us free. And this term we are going to look at various aspects of what that freedom means.

And we will be looking at the book of Exodus, the second book in the Bible, which is a book all about freedom.

This evening we are looking at being free from the past, and Exodus 2.11-3.21, for it is impossible to be truly free unless we have learnt to deal with our pasts.

- b) Mistakes and Disappointments

Two things in our pasts can hold us back and stop us being free: mistakes and disappointments.

Moses had both of these in his past.

First, Moses had made a serious mistake.

One answer to the question of what Moses, David and Paul had in common is that they were possibly the three individuals God used most in the history of his dealings in the world.

Another answer might be that they were all guilty of murder.

Moses had killed a man. He thought he had covered up his crime, but when it is discovered he flees to a foreign land and tries to start a new existence.

No matter who we are, we all have things from our past that we are ashamed of. They may be things that we have hidden, or things that have come out. We have all got it wrong, made mistakes, hurt people and hurt God.

As with Moses, it can happen very quickly. We can find ourselves doing something we wouldn't have thought we were capable of.

These things we've done wrong in our pasts can stop us being free.

Secondly, we can also be held back by disappointments.

It looks like Moses was trying to do the right thing. He had seen one of his fellow countrymen being treated unjustly, and had leapt to his defence. He had had compassion on this man who was being beaten. Quite possibly he had felt a calling by God to do something about an unjust state of affairs – to set this people free, and stop their oppression.

But it had all gone wrong. It was ungratefully received by the other Israelites (whom he had been trying to help), and had provoked opposition from others. He had been misunderstood and unappreciated. His efforts had resulted in failure and he was forced to flee.

We will all have had disappointments in our pasts: disappointments with work, with relationships, and maybe with God. We may have tried to do something for God, and it had ended badly, tried sharing our faith and had been rejected by a friend, tried helping someone and ended up making things worse.

(Personal example of either mistakes or disappointments)

While I was at university I got involved with work with the homeless. I helped start a charity, and tried to spend time with those in the street community, but it was actually all too much, and at the end of my second year I had burnt out. I had glandular fever, which turned into ME or chronic fatigue, and I had to drop out of university. And it was confusing, as I had tried to serve God, thought I was doing what God wanted of me, but it had ended badly.

c) The effects of our pasts

Our pasts can hold us back, make us fearful, and stop us living life to the full. Moses starts in verse 11 a fearless young man, confident of what he can do and contribute. But by chapter 3 he is severely lacking in confidence, is fearful, and feels like he doesn't belong. He has called his son, Gershom, which means 'a foreigner' – he feels like an outcast.

Moses has let his past, his mistakes and his disappointments, constrain him, and define him. And it does seem impossible to escape what we've done in the past.

(Example of the past staying with us)

Tony Blair recently announced that all the royalties of his memoirs, estimated at several millions of pounds, will go to the Royal British Legion. And all the newspapers have been questioning whether this is an attempt by Blair to make amends for the war with Iraq. Whatever he does it seems almost impossible for him to escape from a decision he made 7 years ago when he had to decide whether to take this country to war.

d) What not to do

But God is a God who brings freedom, and he brings us freedom from our pasts.

How can we deal with our pasts? How can we stop them defining us, from holding us back?

What can we do?

We cannot undo our pasts, though if you're anything like me you spend lots of time trying to reverse what happened in your mind.

We cannot try to persuade ourselves that our mistakes were not wrong, or didn't matter.

We cannot try to pretend that disappointments didn't hurt.

We cannot run away, trying to form an existence away from anything that might remind us.

This is my favourite method, and one that Moses goes for.

True freedom does not come through running away from our pasts or trying to delude ourselves. What is done is done, and we cannot change this. True freedom comes another way. It comes from doing three things:

1. Remember who God is

First, we have to remember who God is.

a) Looking outwards not inwards

The first thing that God does with Moses in order to set him free from his past, is to remind him who he is. He says, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.'

The way that God deals with Moses' past is not by getting Moses to reflect about what he had done and who he was, but by getting him to focus on God. He gets him to look outwards not inwards.

Our pasts make us constrained when they make us look within, becoming focussed on ourselves, our own inadequacies, our own failings, our own disappointments, on what we've done, and what has been done to us.

But true freedom comes by looking outwards, by looking at God.

b) God is God

And freedom comes by remembering who God is. It comes from remembering his character. He is a loving God. He loves us no matter what we have done, or who we've hurt, or how often we've made mistakes.

He's a forgiving God. If we confess our sins to him he promises to forgive us. He does not hold grudges, but releases us from our mistakes. He longs to reconcile us to himself.

c) The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

And freedom comes from remembering that he is the God of 'Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' God is a God of imperfect people, not perfect people. He is a God who loves imperfect people.

He is the God of Abraham, who was promised a son through his wife Sarah, but couldn't wait and so tried to make things happen by sleeping with his maidservant. Abraham, who gave his wife as mistress to a neighbouring king, telling him she was his sister, in order to protect his own skin. Abraham, whose life had been one long disappointment of not being able to have a child.

He is the God of Isaac, who did exactly as his father had done, protecting himself by giving away his wife to a neighbouring king as his mistress.

He is the God of Jacob, who pretended to be his brother in order to deceive his father and steal from that brother, and who made a fortune by lying and stealing, and then had thirteen children by four different women.

And yet, despite all their failings and weaknesses, God loved them, and was able to work with them to bring about great things.

d) I am who I am

Freedom comes from remembering who God is, and what he is capable of.

God tells Moses that he is 'I am who I am' or perhaps 'I will be what I will be'. This name has strong future connotations. His name might be translated: 'I cause to be.' He is a God who makes things happen. He is a God who gives a future to those who feel like they have no future. He is a God of those with a past, who have been disappointed, who have had serious failures, and a God who gives these people a future hope.

e) Worship

So becoming free from our pasts starts with worship: remembering who God is.

When we feel like we are being held back by our failings and the disappointments of the past, we need to look away from ourselves and remember that God is a God who loves us, even when we mess up. He forgives us and welcomes us back to him. And he is a God who

attaches himself to imperfect people, and is able to use imperfect people for to do extraordinary things. He is a God who gives people a future.

2. Return to the place of failure

Secondly, we become free from our pasts by being prepared to return to the place of failure.

a) Return to Egypt

God says to Moses, 'Go to Egypt.'

Egypt was the place where everything went wrong for Moses. It was the place where he got it wrong, where he was rejected and misunderstood, and had to flee. It would have been the last place Moses would have wanted to go to.

And now God asks him to return to that place.

b) Confronting our pasts, confessing our pasts, trying again

We cannot be free from our pasts unless we are able to confront them. We cannot always run from them. Eventually, if we want to be free, we have to return to them.

This might mean a physical return. It might mean a phone call to someone we hurt but never said sorry to them. It might mean seeking reconciliation with someone where the relationship has broken down.

Or it might mean going back to what happened with God, confessing to him what we have done, or confessing to a close friend what we went through.

With disappointments I can mean trying again. For Moses it meant returning to the very people who had rejected him, and to try the very thing that hadn't worked before – freeing them from their oppression.

It can be tempting when you make a mistake, make a fool of yourself, 'I will never try that again.' But being free means being able to try again.

(personal example of returning to the place of failure)

After the disappointments at university with the street community, I decided that that sort of work was not for me. I felt like I had the wrong sort of temperament and none of the right skills. But when I started to think about coming to St Peter's I felt like God was perhaps calling me to return to something that I had failed at, to try again, to return to the place of failure.

Freedom comes from recognising who God is, and then returning to the place of failure.

3. Resolve to do things God's way

Thirdly, being free from our pasts means resolving to do things God's way

a) Moses doing things his way, and then God's way

When Moses killed the Egyptian he was trying to do things his own way. He may have thought he was doing the right thing, but he didn't ask God what the right way forward was. He was trying to do things his own way.

But true freedom is found, not by trying to do everything our own way, but by listening to God and trying to do things his way.

You notice that God tells Moses exactly what to do next time. He tells him what to say, and what to do, and what he'll need. He gets the direction from God, and the details from God. God is in effect saying, 'We tried your method of saving the Israelites, but it didn't go very well did it? Let's try my way this time.'

b) Repentance and Listening

This is the essence of what the Bible means by repentance. Literally turning around – no longer going your own way, but going the way that God has set for us.

We may not hear God with the same sort of clarity that Moses did, but the important thing is that we ask God, and listen, and then that we do our best with the information that we have. It is being open to God, and his method, that is crucial.

c) Doing things with God

Resolving to do things God's way means doing things with God.

God promises that he will be with Moses. Before Moses tried to do things his way, by himself. He tried to do it with his physical power, or possibly his position in Pharaoh's court.

But God is saying to him, 'Do it in my power – with me. You're now old and physically weak. You've lost your position in the court of Pharaoh. So let's do things with my power.'

We get things wrong by relying on ourselves to make a situation better, resorting to physical force, or trying to control people or events. But being free from our pasts, means deciding to move forward with God in control, with God fighting our battles, protecting us and guiding us. This takes all the pressure off us, and puts the responsibility into God's hands. All we need to do is listen and join in with what God is doing.

(personal illustration of moving from doing things my way to God's way)

This is the difference between what I was trying to do the street community when I was at university, and doing things with the Helping People Team here in Brighton. I am much more aware of my weaknesses, and so have not tried to do things by myself. At university I

rushed around feeling responsible for everything and everyone. But I now realise that it is God's work, and that he will send the right things to do and the right people at the right times. It is ultimately his work.

Conclusion

God is a God who longs to set us free. He longs to set us free from the mistakes and disappointments in our pasts, and he does this by reminding us who he is, inviting us to return to the place of failure, and encouraging us to do things his way in the future. He does all these things through the Holy Spirit.

Follow-up: Praying for one another in twos and threes, or conventional ministry.