



BORN FREE? - GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE 2013 SERMON

BY PROF SAROJINI NADAR

Good morning dear friends and since you are friends I do not have to say all protocol observed. Thank you for this opportunity to share some of my reflections with you this morning. I consider it a great privilege and certainly an honour.

Let us pray: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable unto you God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.*

In 1955, fifty thousand volunteers were asked to collect 'freedom demands' from the people of South Africa. The responses from the people were fed into a final document that has come to be known as The *Freedom Charter*. The *Freedom Charter* was launched by the Congress of the People on 26 June 1955 in Kliptown near Johannesburg. It states:

We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:

That South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and

That no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the People;

That our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality;

That our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood [and sisterhood - forgive them God, it was 1955], enjoying equal rights and opportunities;

That only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief;

And

Therefore we, the People of South Africa, black and white together - equals, countrymen and brothers [sic] - adopt this Freedom Charter. And we pledge ourselves to strive together, sparing neither strength nor courage, until the democratic changes here set out have been won....

And so here we are, 2013 - the democratic state that was struggled for with blood, sweat and tears has been won, and we popularly declare that all those born after 1994 are indeed born free. They are born free because as the freedom charter declares: "the people shall govern;" and South Africa belongs

to all who live in it - black and white.” One is tempted to say “and they all lived happily ever after.”

And yet - the question that I am tasked to reflect on today is - are we born free? Are those born after 1994 really born free? Are those who live in democratic South Africa really free?

What is freedom after all? The most scholarly definitions suggest that freedom implies at least two things: 1) the absence of force - or coercion; and 2) the presence of choice - the right to choose, what is of value to one. If this is so, then many of us here can declare that indeed we are free. Of course it is not as simple as this.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner for Economics in his book, *Development as Freedom*, tells us that the right to choose, or our capability to choose, is restricted by what he terms “un-freedoms.” These “un-freedoms” are not individual but structural in nature. In other words, he asserts that the worth of our individual freedom lies in the structures which govern us not just legally and politically but socially and culturally. The problem is that in South Africa, we see ourselves as free because the political government which governs us espouses values of freedom. However, we are governed by other structures too - cultural structures, educational structures and dare I say religious and spiritual structures. These are structures which may preach freedom, but actually through their practices could promote “un-freedom.” A Medical Research Council survey on abuse of women, illustrates the point most clearly, when a male respondent, a perpetrator of violence against his wife declares ‘I do not believe in democracy in the home. That is something up there in the government - not in the house.’ In other words, “in the house,” this man operates according to his cultural and religious beliefs and his social upbringing - not as a citizen of a country whose Constitution values his wife as an equal.

Sen’s thinking directs us to at least two viewpoints which I would like us to consider. The first is that freedom cannot be obtained by means of legislation alone.

The ten principles of the *Freedom Charter* are as follows:

1. The People Shall Govern!
2. All National Groups Shall have Equal Rights!
3. The People Shall Share in the Country’s Wealth!
4. The Land Shall be Shared Among Those Who Work It!
5. All Shall be Equal Before the Law!
6. All Shall Enjoy Equal Human Rights!
7. There Shall be Work and Security!
8. The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!
9. There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!
10. There Shall be Peace and Friendship!

These ten principles are the basis of the South African Constitution and are the basis of the many laws and bills that have been passed as a result of the principles of equality and restitution promised in the Freedom Charter. For example, the Domestic Violence Act of 1998; The Civil Union Act of 2006 which allows for same-sex couples to marry; The Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994; The South African Schools Act of 1996, And Education Laws Amendment Act of 1999, which provides for equal and fair education. These Acts provide the *legal* means by which the principles of the Freedom Charter have been implemented. But while we have all this legislation, we know that we still live in one of the most violent countries in the world, where women, people of homosexual orientation and children meet violent deaths. They are seemingly not the beneficiaries of the freedoms which democracy promised. We know we live in a country where textbooks are not delivered to poor scholars and where students and parents get trampled on as they push against the doors of learning. This is because democracy can only provide legal freedom - what those who are made most vulnerable in society need is not just legal freedom - but freedom that comes from a place of deep commitment to care and justice.

The second thought which Amartya Sen inspires is that freedom cannot be achieved through charity alone. Here Bishop Dom Helder Camara's famous words come to mind "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." While giving food to the poor is always welcomed, and may contribute to their freedom from hunger for a few hours, asking and resolving the questions that contribute to their hunger is what will provide long-term freedom from hunger.

So, if legislation and charity are inadequate to the task of helping us achieve freedom, what is needed? I suggest that at least three principles are needed: These are *conscience, consciousness and courage*. Let us reflect on each of these in turn:

Conscience

Conscience is that inner voice that tells us the difference between right and wrong. But conscience is not just innate and inherent - in other words, it does not just "fall from heaven" - conscience is developed through a number of factors including what we have been taught through our sacred texts. Our Old Testament reading this morning develops in us a conscience about the value of human beings. Our inherent value lies in the fact that we are created in the image of God - female and male - we are created in the image of God. We bear the image of God - as the "infamous" Lady Gaga says in her song:

I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way

Don't hide yourself in regret
Just love yourself and you're set

I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way

Yes, we are born this way - black, white, Israeli, Palestinian, gay, straight, we are born this way - this way - each of us in the image of God. When we inhibit another's freedom based on the fact that they are black or white or Palestinian or gay - what we are doing is interfering with the image of God in that person. Our conscience should immediately alert us about messing with divinity. A few years ago, when we ran a gender violence bible study workshop, I remember wanting the slogan on our T-shirts to read "Women are created in the image of God - Violence against women is violence against God." The thought of violence against God - was an assault on some people's theological sensibilities though, so we settled on 'Violence against women is a sin', which of course recast the debate in traditional theological terms. However, if we allowed our conscience to recast this issue as violence against God we may think twice. Maybe Anene Booysen and Reeva Steenkamp would be alive if we allowed our collective conscience to see violence against women as violence against God. To put this in more positive terms, we have to see the divine in each other. *Namaste*, a traditional Indian greeting, means the divine in me, greets the divine in you.

We are born divine, because we are made in the image of God, but we are not born free. Not even Jesus, as God incarnate, was born free. In fact he would have experienced many "un-freedoms" especially being born to an unmarried mother; being born poor in a lowly stable; being born as a refugee in Bethlehem and living his first few years as a refugee in Egypt. This was how God became incarnate and dwelt among us, in the midst of un-freedoms - as an "illegitimate child", poor and a refugee. In a sense God mirrors us in the way in which we mirror God - in all our imperfections and "un-freedoms." If we allow our conscience to convict us of this fact, we move closer towards consciousness of those things which inhibit our freedoms. And this is the next principle which I wish to discuss - consciousness.

Consciousness

A consciousness of "un-freedoms" is what Luke portrays Jesus as recognising, when he opens the scroll and reads from Isaiah:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

In order to enable freedom we have to develop a consciousness - an awareness of the "un-freedoms" which exists in society. Consciousness-raising, about the plight of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised, Jesus asserts, is the business of the Gospel. It is so easy to be oblivious of,

or even indifferent to, the un-freedoms around us. I often share my experience of visiting Elminah Castle off the Gold Coast in Ghana. Elminah Castle was the slave fort fortress built by the Portuguese and used as a place where the dungeons which kept the women and men that were to be taken to their new homes were kept. They kept these women and men there until some of them got thin enough so that they could fit through “the door of no return.” More than the horror of discovering the conditions of slavery under which these human beings were kept was the fact that on top of the dungeons was built a church! Are we conscious of the dungeons that lay beneath our own religious institutions?

Jesus was fully aware of the un-freedoms around him, and not only did he name them, but he acted against them. Acting against un-freedom, however, requires courage - which brings me to my final point.

Courage

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus shows enormous courage in the midst of the many un-freedoms experienced by the people of his time. In fact, it is his courage as he speaks out and acts against these un-freedoms that give those around him opportunity and reason to have him executed. From chapter 11 right until chapter 14 when he is executed, Mark records a series of events which show Jesus challenging people’s un-freedoms. The most significant of these is the driving out of the money changers in the temple:

Mark 11:15-18 (NRSV)

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves;¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?

But you have made it a den of robbers.’

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

What Mark is recording for us in the lead-up to Jesus’ execution is Jesus’ opposition to the practice of a “Temple Tax.” The Temple Tax was a requirement for everyone who would attend the temple for Passover to make sacrifices. Because only money made for use in the temple was allowed people had to first change their money for “Temple money.” It was like a mini-forex service, and the money-changers charged commission! So basically what was happening was that some people were making a lot of money from people wanting to worship God. Sounds a bit like the prosperity gospel to me!

Why is it that when the poor are in search of freedom, they always get “short-changed” so to speak? Consider the housing scandals in this country for example. People pay money in good faith, and then find their houses have been sold twice-over to someone else, or they receive poor quality houses, or worse still they never receive their homes. Jesus was opposing structures like religion and corrupt rulers that seek to keep people in perpetual states of poverty. And Mark records:

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

And indeed they were successful in killing him. One of my favourite quotations is from Megan McKenna who declares: “To say that Jesus died for our sins is only half a theology - it is to forget that he died because he was dangerous to a society that wanted to hold onto its power.” Challenging un-freedoms requires courage, but can also result in death. Over 2000 years ago Jesus challenged un-freedom in Palestine and he was executed. Today Palestinians too continue to challenge un-freedom - they continue to challenge those who say their oppression is written in the book - and they too are put to death. Indeed we sometimes pay for courage with our lives. I can almost hear Bob Marley sing in the background:

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our mind...
How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look?
Yes, some say it's just a part of it:
We've got to fulfill the book.
Won't you have to sing
These songs of freedom? -
'Cause all I ever had:
Redemption songs...

Are we prepared to sing these songs of freedom - even when they kill our prophets - even when they kill us?

But death is not the last word - thankfully.

With courage comes hope. We may not be “born free” but we can be made free, when we free ourselves and we work towards freeing others. Christ has set this example before us. This is what the invitation to be “born again” is about. Challenging un-freedom may result in death, like the execution of Jesus shows, but freedom is “born again” through the resurrection.

Maya Angelou’s poem *Still I Rise* captures this rising, this re-birth, most poignantly:

I Rise...

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise

I rise

The freedom charter ends with the words:

Let all people who love their people and their country now say, as we say here:

These freedoms we will fight for, side by side, throughout our lives, until we have won our liberty

It is still as relevant today as it was in 1955.