

6th October 2019

Preacher: Steven Cooper

Hymns: **342** **All hail the power of Jesu's name!**
 6 **Father, we love you**
 736 **In heavenly love abiding**
 712 **Put peace into each other's hands**
 313 **Thine be the glory**

Readings: **Lamentations 1:1-6**
 Lamentations 3:19-26 (canticle)
 Luke 17:5-10

“Slaves for God”

*Break, O Lord, your word as bread for the feeding of our souls.
And may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to
you, our Strength and our Redeemer.*

“I know I may come off quiet, I may come off shy,
But I feel like talking, feel like dancing when I see this guy...
I'm a slave for you, I cannot hold it, I cannot control it;
I'm a slave for you, I won't deny it, I'm not trying to hide it.”

So wrote Chad Hugo and Pharrell Williams, as lyricists for, of course, Britney Spears. How do I know that? Well, from the liner notes of this CD—Britney Spears's album, *Britney*: one of the latest things to emerge in the ongoing process of unpacking removal boxes at the manse. To whom this CD belongs—myself, or my wife Ruth—I feel I would be wise not to comment.

Anyway, *Slave 4 u* is the opening track; and it is catchy, in no small part because this word *slave* is a very strong word. It's a very emotive word. It's a word that, in other contexts, recalls to us a really shockingly appalling, evil and irrevocable side of the human story. It is not a word that it is really possible to throw around lightly.

As such, it is the word that really jumps out at me in the reading we have heard this morning from Luke's gospel. “We are worthless slaves.” What are we to make of that? I dare say, our Administrator Beatrice, as she puts together the order of service and notice sheet that you each have, week by week, had to chase me for the title to today's sermon—as I had been undecided over that: whether it was too loaded, too difficult a phrase that I have used there. You will have to be the judge. But I admit, when we consider the horror of human slavery, both in history and in the present day, the idea that God—that Jesus—uses the language of ‘slave’ in talking

about his own disciples, is a difficult one. It is challenging. Indeed the idea that religious adherence entails followers being in some way mindless slaves, exploited and forced malignly to follow someone else's rules, is a hot-button issue for the likes of Richard Dawkins and others in the militantly secularist camp who have a negative conception of Christianity. So this challenge of what to make of Jesus alluding to the idea that we are slaves to God, is what I want to think about this morning.

Firstly, what is Jesus actually saying here? The definition of a slave is someone who works, involuntarily, and to whom, in the master's eyes, nothing is owed in return. The slave is expected to do the master's bidding without any reward, without any *entitlement* to payment, or to a place at the table, or even to thanks from the master. They simply do what the master says, because they are a slave. A gracious master—if that is not a total contradiction in terms—may show some measure of kindness to a slave; but that is not something, by definition, that the slave can earn, or can expect.

In the verses leading up to this passage from Luke, Jesus has been talking to the disciples, or apostles, about the challenging business of being a humble and faithful follower of God. He has been laying out the profound importance of doing nothing to trip others up, and the crucial importance of forgiveness: things that, I'm sure we would all agree, are by no means always easy. Following God is demanding.

In response to this, the apostles say, "Increase our faith!" On the face of it, a noble aspiration. But Jesus—who always sees what is on people's hearts, and what lies behind their words—seems to recognise this as a desire, on the part of the apostles, for an easier way: for some sort of concession from God, for some sort of bypass of the challenge and at times demanding commitment that following God entails. And Jesus is having none of it. He summarily dismisses their supposed demand for increased faith: he basically says to them, "You don't need more faith." Exaggerating to make the point, he says that, "If you had faith [even] the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you." You don't need *more faith*. What you need though, is to recognise that, even with faith, there are no shortcuts. Faith doesn't provide a free pass to living the kind of life—of love, of care for others, of forgiveness—that God demands.

And so, drawing on the context of a society in which, as unpalatable as it is, slaves were commonplace in people's households and in which that society was still some years away from recognising the fundamental injustice of such a state of affairs, Jesus says, "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done

all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!' ”

Jesus is reminding his apostles that, faithful as they are, God does not owe them anything. To live the kind of life that befits the people of God is something that God demands of them, and is something that they do, because God is God, and God demands it. And as gracious indeed as God may be, it is not because God owes us anything. It is not that we are worthy of some reward. And in that sense, we have to say that, as faithful Christian followers, we are *slaves* to God; or, perhaps, slaves for God. 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.'

We fit the definition of slave, in as much as we are owed nothing by our master God for the work that we are required, of our relationship to God, to do. But when we consider this alongside any and every example of human slavery throughout history, that is absolutely where the comparison ends. In every other respect, our relationship as slaves for God is fundamentally different and unique in kind, compared to the horror and the evil of slavery as it has been—and indeed is still in places today—manifested in the human family. And this is what I want to think about now.

Here at Wesley's Chapel, we have a notable history relating to Methodists' engagement with efforts to end the absolute evil of slavery as experienced by African people in America and the Caribbean in recent centuries. We have in our font here, the stone from the house of Nathaniel Gilbert in Antigua, after he was convicted by John Wesley's writings on slavery to renounce, as far as the law allowed him to in the 18th century, the practices of slavery with which he was complicit.

And the efforts of John Wesley himself to promote an end to the barbaric practices of slavery are remarkable. In the museum shop downstairs, you can buy a copy of Wesley's 'Thoughts upon slavery' that he published in 1775. This is something much more than a thing of historical curiosity: it remains an extraordinarily powerful piece of writing to this day, and is well worth reading. It is passionate, it is harrowing to read, and Wesley was seriously informed in his awareness of what was going on. Of all the abject horror and inhuman evil that we know today of that history of slavery and the slave trade, Wesley was fully aware of it all, even at the time; and he saw it for what it was.

To quote just a part of his response to this, he writes, using the language of his time: "I would now enquire, Whether these things ... can be reconciled (...) with any degree of either Justice or Mercy. The grand plea is, 'They are authorized by Law.' But can Law, Human Law, change the nature of things? Can it turn Darkness into Light, or evil into good? By no means. Notwithstanding ten thousand Laws, right is right and wrong is wrong still. There must still remain an essential difference between Justice

and Injustice, Cruelty and Mercy. So that I still ask, who can reconcile this treatment of the Negroes, first and last, with either Mercy or Justice?"

We will reflect more on John Wesley's engagement with slavery at our Thursday lunchtime service on the 31st of this month, when, as part of our series entitled 'A History of Methodism in Eleven Objects', we will take as the focus a quill pen, in the museum downstairs, used by Wesley to write his final letter, shortly before he died, to William Wilberforce, encouraging his work towards abolition.

The slavery of which Wesley is writing, as we all know, stands as a stain upon the face of human history; and its legacy continues to be felt today, especially in America. And it has a very prominent place in our consciousness whenever we reflect, as we are doing this morning, upon the word *slave*.

But our slavery to God, our slavery to Christ, is, in almost every respect, so fundamentally different to this, as to be virtually its opposite. Because God in Christ is a *subversive* God. God takes the deepest depths of brokenness in human experience, and in the life of the world, and turns them on their heads. That this is so, was clear, not least, to slaves themselves, on the plantations of the American South. I cannot in any way begin to speak for those who have experienced slavery; but I can seek to honour their own words, and in particular the rich testimony of faith in this subversive God that is reflected in the musical canon of so-called African American Spirituals. And in this, slaves, for whom the concept of 'master' was undoubtedly associated with the daily experience of oppression and brutality that was the life of a slave, nonetheless spoke of Jesus using that same language of 'master'. This spiritual, as it would have been sung by slaves, serves as an example:

Keep a-inchin' along, keep a-inchin along.

Massa Jesus is comin' by and by.

Keep a-inchin' along, like a po' inch-worm.

Massa Jesus is comin' by and by.

The respected American professor of church music, and Lutheran pastor, Paul Westermeyer, writes in his book *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice*: "The psalms know of God the victorious king, who—curiously, ironically, and unlike earthly kings—is always subversively on the side of the poor and oppressed. In a parallel way the spirituals know Jesus is the true 'massa,' who, unlike the earthly 'massa,' genuinely cares for and liberates the people."

In the words of Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7, verse 22: "For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ."

So why is our relationship as slaves to our master Jesus, so unique, and so fundamentally different to every other kind of slavery that exists? Briefly, three things:

Number one: In God, in Jesus, we have a master who chose to give his own life for the sake of those—for us—who would be his slaves. A master who himself, in the words of Paul's letter to the Philippians, took the form of a slave. This is so contradictory to any human master-slave relationship that exists. Our master, in his broken body, which we remember in bread and wine this morning, identifies with the broken bodies of those who have been subject to the human evil of slavery; and who—although we have not earned it and don't deserve it—gives freely of himself without reserve for all whom God has claimed as slaves for him.

Number two: Jesus says, in John chapter 15, verse 15, "I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." In other words, while we may technically be defined as slaves for God, in that we are not owed anything by God for our service—and while God, Jesus, is inevitably the master—what we are in effect is so much more than a slave: we are co-workers with God. That is incredible, and yet that is what our relationship as slaves for God really amounts to.

Another way to think about this, on a day-to-day level, if you factor out issues around pay, is to say that our relationship to God is really like that between an employer (a good employer, God) and an employee. As with any employer-employee relationship, we are under authority: but when we are working in accord with the employer's purposes, it is a harmonious experience. We are working, together with God, to shared ends, of love, justice, righteousness, peace. There is nothing in this that we need resist. The relationship only acquires the sense of something unequal, a kind of disciplinarian master-slave relationship, when we strain that friendship of which Jesus speaks by—to maintain the analogy—acting against the purposes of the employer. It is when an employee acts against their employer's purposes that the harmony is lost, that discipline is invoked, that things rapidly become very difficult. What that means, in the context of our working relationship with God, is when we turn away from God's purposes and instead act out of self-interest.

And this leads me to number three: With all human slavery, escape from slavery, by definition, means freedom and liberation. By contrast, our master-slave relationship with God is utterly unique, because it is the alternative to, and the liberation from, every other kind of enslavement into which we are liable otherwise to fall. If we rebel from our status as slaves for God, what human beings invariably find is that they become enslaved to other things; to false idols, of which self-interest is one, along with the false idols of materialism, or the fantasy of a humanism that believes that we achieve everything under our own strength. And all these alternative enslavements,

just like any kind of human slavery, when the going gets tough, they leave us with nothing, and with nowhere to go—unlike our master God, in whom is liberty, and sustenance, and life itself. In Peter’s words to Jesus in John 6:68, “Master, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” In the words of our canticle from Lamentations, spoken by the author for a people, Judah, who had ‘gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude’, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

For all these reasons, our relationship as slaves for God stands in absolute contrast to every other kind of slavery or enslavement that exists in our world. As such, it also absolutely demands that we do all that we can to end those forms of slavery that do exist in our world even today. This indeed is part of the work that God, as our Master, sets us to do. The inhuman exploitation of migrants crammed into boats, for example, bears terrible parallels with some aspects of the transatlantic slave trade of earlier centuries. The ever-present potential for exploitation of child labour in the manufacture overseas of clothes that find their way into our shops is tantamount to slavery, and is utterly against God’s purposes. We need to be vigilant, as Wesley was, to these things. And wherever possible we need to act.

I am approaching my conclusion... My take-home message from all this is: Let us embrace our status as ‘slaves’ for God—slaves whom Jesus calls his friends—recognising that the work to which God puts us is life-giving, a joy to partake in; and with a benevolent master in whom—in the most difficult of times—there is new life to be found.

But one final thought: We do need to remember that Jesus *is* the Master. The temptation is always to forget that, and to try and resort to our own resources. That’s where Jesus called out the apostles in our reading today: In saying ‘Increase our faith,’ they were responding to a feeling that they weren’t up to the task and a notion that, if only they were better resourced within themselves, with ‘greater faith’, then they would be able to do it all. But what we need, to be faithful and true in living out the life that God demands of us, is not greater resources in ourselves; but rather to keep on paying attention to Jesus as the one who gives us our direction. That means prayer. It means attentive listening to the voices of all those around us. It means the true humility befitting of people who see themselves as slaves for God.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.