

Eighteen years is a long time in any life. Where were you eighteen years ago; that's back in 1999? Eighteen years is also a long time to be locked into one position, bent double, unable to straighten and stand up. Your free will longing to be set free but nature having robbed your freedom of choice in the matter, your horizon is restricted; limited to as far as you can crane your neck upward. Such was the life of a daughter of Abraham whom Christ set free in today's gospel.

There are many stories of liberation in history; inspiring tales, concerning the resilience and determination of the human spirit: none more so, perhaps in modern history, than that of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Despite the changes and upheavals that inevitably follow in the wake of such seismic events, the overwhelming sense for most people at the time was that of liberation; that what had seemed insurmountable had actually, as if in the dream, been overcome. And events in one sphere cause reverberations elsewhere. How many here this morning, for example, can trace their own presence ultimately to that tumbling of the Wall in 1989?

There are many realms where restricted lives might suddenly find freedom and the room to breathe: politics, economics, education, relationships and even, of course, in the matter of religion. In fact, in this endeavour in which you and I are engaged - this seeking of the kingdom of heaven - there is ultimately only one kind of freedom that matters and it is illustrated for us in today's gospel.

Last Sunday I mentioned to you that when it talks of the Natural Man, Orthodox Theology follows the teaching of the Fathers and not what biologists or anthropologists understand by that term. For us, the *natural* man is revealed in the human nature of the incarnate Christ, the New Adam, joined in hypostatic union with His Divinity. Briefly, that means Christ is one person, a *someone*, existing as two *somethings*, human and divine.

The point of this is for us to realise that our true *self*, our true freedom, is found in being *that* Natural Man, the one made in the image and likeness of God, *rather than* what the world regards as natural: the species, *Homo Sapiens*, the political Man, the social Man, even the religious Man, by which I mean *Pagan Man* - for that Man is *Fallen Man*.

In western Christianity this time of the year used to be called a 'penitential season;' like Lent, a time for penitential acts, atoning for ones sins. I am not sure whether they still do that in any meaningful way, now. As Orthodox Christians we prefer to call it a 'time of repentance,' by which we mean a time to change our minds; to see things in the mind of Christ.

One of the many difficulties believers have comes from imagining that it is fine to have Christian actions and Christian morality and even Christian beliefs. The problems arise because they do not have the Christian mind. I was reminded of this only this week with the announcement of the death of Harry Blamires, the great Anglican apologist for traditional Christianity at the age of 101. It was his book, *The Christian Mind*, published in 1963, that had a profound effect on my own thinking, as it pointed out the loss of this mind among modern western Christians.

That woman in today's gospel - I almost said, *stands* for this fallen mind of Man but the truth is, she is bent over, only half-way standing. And the same is true for many others, for our very heads, our minds, are facing the earth, not lifted up on high.

At first it seems normal, dare I say *natural*, to sympathise with the ruler of the synagogue: "*There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.*" One more day of patient suffering will make little difference after eighteen years, surely? She can come back on Sunday, the first day of the week and be healed. This is what the Law, the Torah, had laid down, after all.

But this is not the mind of Christ. One would not treat animals in such a way; animals who look to their human masters for their care. How much more, then, Jesus points out with righteous indignation, when it comes to a child of God and a daughter of Abraham? So it is that her healing means that she can stand upright and in body, she is set free!

The problem for so many Christians, including many claiming to be among the Orthodox, is that they are in fact *Old Testament Christians*, their thinking has not yet let go of the old Adam's fallen mind and their approach to religion and the spiritual life, is one of outward conformity to rules, as if just keeping the rules can earn you God's blessing.

Yes, there are, indeed, rules for living the Orthodox Christian life, just as there are the Holy Canons for organising and governing ecclesiastical life. Rules can help the souls that are unsure or unknowing; for the disciple they point out, indicate and lay before them the way to live. '*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go,*' says the Lord in Psalm 31. '*I will guide you with My eye.*' But what purpose is served by any outward action if there be no change within as motivation; mere compliance without conversion of heart. What is the point of a perfectly kept fast, when the heart is still full of un-repentent pride, vainglory and arrogance?

The only commandments we have are those of Christ Himself: "*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*" (Matt. 11:29-30) But herein lies the essential paradox of our liberation: it is willing obedience to God that sets us free of the tyranny of the old Adam, the man bound by the fallen passions. Even the so-called virtues of fallen man turn sour. The late Harry Blamires pointed this out in his book, describing how *Loyalty* for example, much desired and admired, was also the most dubious of the virtues; it was loyalty that bound the SS to Hitler.

It is hard for the worldly-minded man to grasp this; it seems the antithesis of freedom, this ascetic assault on our self-gratification. But we shall, nevertheless, beg his pardon and point out that he is, in fact, the slave of his passions and the victim of his own enthusiasms. For the truly free soul is the one who knows what he truly is in spirit, Adam, the creation and son of God, not merely the appearance: that simian form that evolved on this planet.

As with the woman in the gospel, Christ can straighten out our lives too. The moment we grasp, in the midst of our temptations, that to do God's will is to find our intended and natural humanity, is also a liberation. Just as the addict longs to be clean and free of his addiction and to have his life back once again, so it is with the soul in the battle against the passions. What we are in our God-given nature is now free to recover that likeness to God. The divine energies effused by God and, indeed, infused even now through the Holy Mysteries of the Church, into these poor earthen vessels, this ape-like form, can transform us from glory to glory.

In the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament, Moses goes to

Pharaoh and demands that the ruler of Egypt let his people go free. And by the hand of God they prefigure the Paschal mystery, passing through the waters to gain their political, social and religious liberation, even their own promised land. But we are of the New Testament, we are not Old Testament Christians. We are redeemed for something better that God has in store for us. For ours is freedom from death and truly the Fathers were right: God became Man that man might become god.