

Revelation 1:4-8

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail¹ on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

“Freed to Be a Kingdom of Priests”

One of the most unforgettable movies of the 1990's in my opinion was *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson's portrayal of the Wars of Scottish Independence and the legendary William Wallace. For me, the movie has two unforgettable moments. The first when the small, ragtag, army of Scots with faces painted blue mooned the English army which grossly outnumbered and out-dressed them at the Battle of Stirling and then whipped them silly. Moral of that story, go to war only by moonlight. The second moment was the execution of William Wallace. Gibson's reputation for making a big, bloody mess of big, bloody messes certainly showed true here with Wallace, played by Gibson, being dragged through city streets behind a horse, then hanged to almost death, and then drawn and dismembered while still alive and watching. Gibson's Wallace endures all of that all the while screaming, "Freedom" for everybody to hear until thy chop his head off.

Freedom, that's an important word in human history. Wallace fought and died for the freedom of the Scots to rule themselves, political freedom. There have been many wars for religious freedom. One of the major reasons behind the American Civil War was freedom from human enslavement. Many people talk about economic freedom. What do we mean by freedom? I remember as an adolescent saying, "It's a free country. I can do what I want." Is adolescent anarchy what we mean by freedom? Most national constitutions written since the French Revolution will say that humans have an inborn right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness which basically means that to be human is to have the freedom to pursue one's own happiness; i.e., to be able to do what you want to do. Of course, we acknowledge the need for order and so there are laws to prevent anarchy and we recognize that there needs to be the pursuit of a more perfect union, better society. But still, what is freedom?

The dictionary says freedom is the state of not being imprisoned, enslaved, or otherwise constrained. When someone is set free it means that what bound them from rightful participation in human community has been removed and they are now free to participate in human community. It does not mean that we are free to do whatever we want to do if it makes us happy. It means we are free to pursue a more perfect union amongst human beings. True freedom only exists within the confines of human community not apart from it.

Freedom is also big topic in the New Testament. Jesus said in regard to discipleship in John's gospel 8:31-36: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" ³⁴ Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus says his teachings are truth and knowing the truth will set us free.

Jesus then explains that his truth sets us free from our enslavement to sin. Basically, we are slaves to sin. In Western culture we don't like the word "slave" because of our past association with the institution of slavery. But, brace yourselves, anywhere in the New Testament you see the word servant, it is better translated as slave. Paul's preferred way of addressing himself was "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ." Slave is even how John introduces himself at the beginning of the Book of Revelation. Part of the Truth Jesus wants us to know that will set us free is that human beings are slaves not servants to sin. Humanity is bound, restrained from keeping its created purpose of glorifying and enjoying God by sin. Sin isn't just that we like doing bad things. That's only the symptom. Sin is the alienation we experience in our relationship with God. Sin is that we are unable to know God and therefore we fend for ourselves and this fending only drives us further away from him and one another so that we become a virus to God's creation rather than its worship leaders.

Jesus, God the Son become human, is the Trinity's self revelation to us. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes that have been scaled over by sin to see him and enables us to be his disciples. The Holy Spirit freely given to us is the proof that the shed blood of Jesus has freed us from sin, freed us from our alienation from God. We are now reconciled to God, bound to God through union with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit and we know the Truth that God so loves us that he gives his life not only for us, but also to us. We are free from sin, but not free to do what we want. We are now free to carry out our created purpose of glorifying and enjoying God as the priests of creation.

John writes there in Revelation an ascription of praise to Jesus, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." He has freed us and made us a kingdom. We are the domain in which he reigns blatantly as Lord. The disciples of Jesus are a visible public union

that covers the planet. Yet, the nature of this kingdom is not to be an empire and rule as the church has attempted to do in the past to disastrous consequence. We are a kingdom of priests who give worship to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus, by his blood, has freed us from our slavery to sin to be the priests who everywhere on this earth bring worship to God. Being priests is a special vocation. God has marked us with himself and set us aside to do special work. In the Old Testament, God was always with the Hebrew people, but it was only the priests who had immediate access to God. Only the priests went in and out before his presence in the temple. So also, we are those in the world today who live in the presence of God. We are his temple. Where we are God is. Through us God is personally addressing all people.

In the Old Testament, priests proclaimed the forgiveness of sin. We, therefore do so also. We have the responsibility of proclaiming to the world that all has been forgiven. Jesus has annihilated everything that could separate anybody from the love of God in Christ. So, we proclaim this forgiveness and call people to turn and come to him, to abide in his word that they might know the truth and be set free to live in it.

Priests intercede for people. Therefore, God has set us aside to be those who pray for people. The work of prayer is something we should train ourselves to be continual about. I've often tried and failed miserably at praying for everyone I see, the things I hear about in the news, and for when people just come to mind. Prayer is hard work. It requires a complete retraining of the mind and like the disciples who went with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane; we fall asleep at the task. Our minds wander. We start thinking about lesser things than the needs of our neighbours whom Jesus calls to love as we love ourselves. Imagine, training your minds to be as preoccupied with the needs of others as much we are preoccupied with our own.

Finally, priests worship. We are the voice of creation's praise and adoration of its maker. We are those who know that there is definite reason to give thanks. We are those who know the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. By the gift of himself for and to us, we are those whom God has lifted forth into an eternal song of praise that everywhere surrounds us. We'll be looking at a few passages from the Book of Revelation in the coming weeks and one thing that stands out is the worship that is going on of God for what he has done and is doing to set his creation free and make all things new.

Friends, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has made us each a priest. He has made it so that we have unhindered access to him. Therefore, proclaim forgiveness and invite others to come to the Truth. Pray always. Rejoice. Enjoy this new life we've been given. Amen.