

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Freedom is not free

Presented by Alan Best

Good morning. In the main street of Williams, Arizona, USA, there is a striking mural, with the motto, Freedom Is Not Free. This is not a new expression and at least four songs were published with this title, or variations of it, as far back as 1965. In 1981, Commander Kelly Strong of the US Coast Guard wrote a poem with the same title. Its opening stanzas read like this:

I watched the flag pass by one day,
It fluttered in the breeze;
A young Marine saluted it,
And then he stood at ease.

I looked at him in uniform,
So young, so tall, so proud;
With hair cut square and eyes alert,
He'd stand out in any crowd.

I thought . . . how many men like him
Had fallen through the years?
How many died on foreign soil?
How many mothers' tears?

How many pilots' planes shot down?
How many died at sea?
How many foxholes were soldiers' graves?
No, Freedom is not free.

In recent years, and especially since 2005, this expression has been adopted to remind all Americans of the gratitude they owe to members of the military for the freedom they enjoy.

And here in Australia, freedom is also ours to enjoy. When we gather for ANZAC Day, VP or Remembrance Day Services, or when we look at the War Memorials in our cities, towns and suburbs all across the country, we remember the many thousands who were prepared to suffer and lay down their lives for that freedom. But here is an interesting thing; for most of us, as recipients of that freedom, all we did was to accept the gift that was offered to us. Unless we have served in our armed forces (as some of you have done) we did not earn that freedom. We did not pay its price yet we received it. In a very real sense, so far as we are concerned, our freedom is free.

But that is only half of the story, because it is true that ultimately, our freedom is not free. The freedom we enjoy was earned for us by each of those who were prepared to fight to defend us, and especially, by those who paid the supreme sacrifice. We are reminded of this truth when we look at our war memorials and read the words, "Lest We Forget."

Using different language, we also declare that "Freedom is not Free" whenever we sing the words of The Recessional, with its repeated phrase, "lest we forget." And the same message is declared in the moving words of "The Ode":

They went with songs to the battle, they were young.
Straight of limb, true of eyes, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.

And so we respond with one voice, "Lest We Forget."

Christians are also recipients of freedom. Through faith in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross, we have been set free from slavery to sin. Sin kept us bound and we were not able to break free by ourselves. Being set free was our greatest need, and through His sacrifice, we have been set free from the penalty and power of sin, and when we go to be with our Saviour in heaven, we will be set free from the presence of sin.

All that was required of us was to repent and accept the gift of freedom that was offered. We did not pay its price; we did not earn it; we did not contribute to it in any way; we did not receive what we deserved but we received what we did not deserve. So far as we were concerned, freedom came to us without cost. All we contributed was our sin – as the Apostle Paul's wrote to the Romans, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

The Apostle Paul was eager to remind the members of the church in Ephesus that they had not earned their freedom. In the second chapter we read: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But while this freedom from sin comes to us as a free gift, for the Lord Jesus Christ, our freedom is not free. It was purchased at great cost because the One who offers this amazing freedom paid the supreme sacrifice for us. In 1 Corinthians 6 we read, You are not your own; you were bought at a price. (1 Corinthians 6:19) And the Apostle John wrote, This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10-11)

And just as Australians gather to remember their fallen, so too, Christians gather to remember the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus as they share in Holy Communion. We remember that during the Last Supper with His disciples, Jesus broke bread and said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." and after supper He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:19-21)

And when we share that solemn meal of remembrance, we know that this is also our “Lest We Forget” moment. Sadly, we have the ability to forget that Jesus paid the complete price for our sins on the cross. All too easily, we can start to imagine that our righteousness and good works somehow played a part in purchasing our freedom. But as the Scriptures remind us, “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6 NIV) and as we read a few moments ago, salvation is the “gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:9 NIV)

And sadly, we can also be tempted to add to our salvation. We are surrounded by faiths whose message is “do,” but for Christians, the message is “done.” Jesus did it all. His sacrifice was perfect and complete, and there is absolutely nothing that needs to be, or can be, added to our salvation. As we read in Hebrews chapter 10, “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Hebrews 10:10 NIV)

Jesus was fully God and fully man, and He suffered the agony of the cross because He first became one of us. This is the wonder of the Incarnation that we celebrate each Christmas.

We find the truth of the Incarnation wonderfully summarised in the second chapter of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where we read that Jesus,

being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
 but made himself nothing,
 taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to death –
 even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8)

We know that Jesus was not born in comfort and did not live a life of luxury. Indeed, the opposite was true. On one occasion, a teacher of the Law told Jesus that he would follow Him wherever He went, but Jesus responded that while foxes had holes in which to live, and birds had their nests, He had no place to lay His head; in other words, He had no place to call home. And during His three years of ministry, while there were times when adoring crowds followed Him everywhere and at one time they even wanted to make Him king by force, there was also increasing opposition that led to intense hatred and plots to kill Him. This was at the centre of God’s eternal plan and Jesus made it clear that He came to die for our sins. He said of Himself, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

And when that time came, He knew the awful agony that lay ahead of Him. He knew what the coming events would cost Him and on the night of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed that if possible, He might be spared the cup of God’s wrath, and in Luke’s Gospel we read that, “. . . his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (Luke 22:44b)

Following His arrest, the agony that He knew was coming was fulfilled, beginning with His dreadful mistreatment during the mockery of a trial that led to His crucifixion. Listen to this graphic description of those events in Mark’s gospel: “They put a purple robe on Him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on Him. And they began to call out to Him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ Again and again they struck Him

on the head with a staff and spit on Him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to Him. And when they had mocked Him, they took off the purple robe and put His own clothes on Him. Then they led Him out to crucify him.”

(Mark 15:17-20)

And finally, Jesus endured the ultimate in humiliation and pain as He suffered the most awful means of public execution that could be imagined. He was crucified between two robbers and passers-by hurled insults at Him. And He paid this sacrifice for your sins and mine – the sinless died for the sinful, the innocent for the guilty.

Friends, if we have placed our trust in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, we have received salvation as a free gift, but our Freedom certainly is not Free. It is the most costly gift ever given! God the Son gave Himself for us. He died in our place and so we, the recipients of this amazing grace, are granted eternal life.

We rejoice in the freedom we have received and the reality of our situation was well expressed by William Newell when he wrote:

Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died
On Calvary.

O, the love that drew salvation's plan!
O, the grace that brought it down to man!
O, the mighty gulf that God did span
At Calvary.

Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty,
At Calvary.