

Freedom!

- an exhilarating concept - a word we say on the first day of the holiday, as we leave behind the scenes of work and routine, and open a new page of experience. It's an ideal people have died for, it is something that enhances our humanity.

But it was not always so popular an idea. I seem to recall that it took a wrong turn in the French Revolution (*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*), to the extent that Beethoven had to change the *Ode to Freedom* in his 9th Symphony to an *Ode to Joy*, lest the music appear to be calling for more executions!

We like to think of ourselves as free: in *Rule, Britannia* we sing: *Britons never shall be slaves*. I have heard that in an older frame: the Jews said to Jesus: *We are children of Abraham, and have never been the slaves of anyone: what do you mean by saying: You will be made free?* (a strange question on the lips of people who eat the Passover every year). Does any one of us come into the world as a free person? Or is our story about a slow growth into the inheritance of freedom? Again, it is sometimes hard to discern real freedom. Was the prodigal son free, as he wasted his inheritance? Or can some apparent freedom be compulsive behaviour, selling ourselves into a new bondage?

Jesus, we believe, came into the world *freely*, in a great deed of love in which the whole Trinity acted together: the Father delivered his Son into the world, into the human family, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. This birth, therefore, was wholly human; but it was like no other. *None of us* comes into the world freely; we each arrive in obedience to the deeds of others, with the co-operation of the Creator. From the beginning of our life we obey the laws of nature and are in subjection to others. But Jesus, entirely open to the Holy Spirit, grew up unimpeded, and inherited the freedom and glory of a humanity at one with the Father. He had to go through the same process of growth and maturing; but he placed no barriers between himself and the Father, and grace was at its fullness in his human life. John's Gospel has a unique vision of this freedom in the heart of Jesus. Read his account of the arrest of Jesus: you'll see how the soldiers can only take him because he gives himself into their hands. In this he perfectly reflects what his Father did in giving his Son into our hands. To act with the Father in this way is perfect freedom: the greatest thing any human could choose to do would be *to do what God does*.

My prayer for Christmas at the end of the second millennium is that the brothers and sisters of Jesus may come to inherit his freedom. It won't set us free from our responsibilities, but mesh us more willingly and wholeheartedly into our human family, our human nature. It will set us free to be more committed, more faithful, more generous in self-giving. Above all, it will liberate in us the image of God in which we were created. And if we can catch a glimpse of *that*, then the possibilities for the human family are really limitless.