

“Freedom Bound: A Tale of Two Meals”

by Ched Myers

*A sermon delivered at an outdoor liturgy on Sunday, August 29th, 2004
at the Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival in Cheltenham, England*

To the hardworking organizers of this amazing Greenbelt gathering; to the campers soldiering through the mud; to all the beautiful families, teenagers, and elders; to the artists and musicians and poets – and all of us who wish we were; to the crews minding the lavatories and the rubbish bins; to the comedians and the clowns and the kids wearing goofy costumes; to the grassroots entrepreneurs, from the craft-sellers to the activist literature hustlers; to the late night party animals, the Celtic chanters and the Goth liturgists; to the many church workers and agency leaders and their wonderful tent sites; to our various volunteers and hosts from Cheltenham and the local area; to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the bloke at the toasted sandwich shop... to *all* of you gathered this morning in the faith, from across the ecumenical spectrum – high church, low church and no church – here in this microcosmic village of God’s people in the wilderness: *The Lord be with you!*

I bring you greetings from sisters and brothers across the ocean. May the Spirit now open our hearts to the Word in this “wilderness” space. The theme of this Festival is “Freedom Bound,” and the focus of this worship service is our celebration and re-enactment of two foundational meals. Each meal gave birth to a people:



Processional march to “the wilderness,” a nearby field

- **Passover** signaled the liberation of Hebrews from the imperial straightjacket of Pharaoh’s Egypt (Ex 12);
- **Eucharist** gathered Christians around the life of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet who Caesar’s imperial execution stake could not vanquish (Mk 14).

As long as these meals are celebrated, these two peoples – cousins who have been estranged for too long – are born again and again. They are perhaps the oldest ritual meals still continually observed in the world.

The Passover and Paschal Feasts have so much in common:

- Both meals commemorate a journey of faith that, in the old saying of the Black Church, "makes a way out of no way": Exodus march, discipleship path.
- Both are meals of memory, in which the central exhortation is "Remember!"
 - "Why is this night different from all other nights?" ask Jews reverently (Ex 12:14, 42).
 - "On the night he was betrayed..." say Christians solemnly (I Cor 11:23-26).
- Both were "last meals" celebrated by communities on the run, hunted by imperial authorities:
 - Passover eaten in haste by Hebrew slaves with their bags packed, fixin' to go feral as they busted a move for the border (Ex 12:11);
 - Eucharist offered by a prophet marked for death, shared with a handful of betrayal-bound disciples in the attic of a Jerusalem safe-house.
- Both meals inaugurated actions of disarmed resistance to empire which became historical watersheds, animating countless future slave revolts, and inspiring many subsequent believers, famous and forgotten, to embrace the *via crucis*.
- Both rituals acknowledge blood as the power of life over death: the blood of lambs on doorposts (Ex 12:7,13), the blood of the Lamb who was slain to ransom every captive (Rev 5:9).
- And both meals proclaim the unique characteristics of the God of the Bible. This God stands in solidarity with the marginalized: Yahweh who hears the cry of the oppressed, Christ who lives among the poor. This God cannot be named or tamed by imperial

civilization, then or now, and is patron of no royal family, then or now. This God is undomesticated and inconvenient, and promises to all who follow the Way deliverance from bondage to slavery, sin and death.

So today we honor these two meals, which together symbolize what it means to be "Freedom Bound" in the true biblical sense of that double entendre: Bound *for* freedom (Passover), and bound *to* the Freedom Struggle and its cost (Eucharist).

And yet, the meaning of freedom is contested in our day. It is, to be sure, a great and treasured value in our two societies, the spiritual legacy of your Magna Carta and our Constitution. My great, great grandfather emigrated from Devonshire to Wisconsin 150 years ago, making a journey along with so many others in hope of greater freedom from both poverty and political repression. This remains a powerful aspiration for many around the world.

But at the same time, the modern, western myth of freedom long ago came unhinged from the biblical story, and so from the beginning has had a darker side: freedom to conquer, to exploit, to dominate. Today freedom for citizens of the First World too often means little more than unfettered consumerism, or the license of the few to have more than their share, or imperial ambition.

Our two biblical meals remind people of faith, however, that God's freedom calls us to self-restraint, servanthood and justice for all. Indeed, the Exodus Passover is followed by another meal—of manna in the wilderness. This story,

representing the very first instructions to Free Israel, stipulates that each household gather only *enough*, so that no one has too much, and no one too little (Ex 16:16-18). We are called to *circulate* the gifts of Creation among all who need them rather than allowing them to *concentrate* in the hands of an elite. This vision of what I call "Sabbath Economics" is betrayed whenever freedom is interpreted as license to tolerate the affluence of a few and the poverty of many.

This Torah lesson was remembered and re-enacted by Jesus of Nazareth in the gospel story of bread in the wilderness (Mk 6:35-44). Surrounded by hungry masses, he "took bread, blessed it, broke it and distributed it" among the people (6:41). Let us recognize that this ritual action was exactly the same as in the Last Supper – suggesting that the great feeding of the multitudes represents the bridge connecting our two meals. Standing ever between Exodus and Eucharist are poor folks hungering for bread and for the Bread of Life. And Jesus' word to disciples remains: "*You feed them!*" (6:37).



Bread in the wilderness: Over 15,000 people gathered for Communion.

This is the biblical version of freedom – to steward rather than pillage the earth, to distribute rather than to hoard her gifts, to

serve rather than to rule, and to give life rather than to take it. It has been carried throughout history not by kings but by carpenters, not by military leaders but by monks, not by princes and their pirated wealth, but by the poor.

This freedom story, spun in the distant Sinai past and remembered by a Nazarene under Rome's boot, was preserved by

- early Christian martyrs who rendered to God everything, and to Caesar not much at all;
- Benedictine communities who returned to the wilderness in the waning days of a decadent Roman empire to discover the evangelical disciplines of fidelity and poverty;
- and by Franciscan nuns and friars who bound their freedom to the poorest of medieval society.

This freedom journey was continued

- in the discipleship vision of Anabaptists who refused to participate in the great and bloody religious wars of Christendom (and for this were hunted down by both Catholics and Protestants alike);
- by Baptist radicals and Methodist reformers, by Quaker abolitionists and Anglican visionaries (such as Thomas Rainsborough, who at Putney parish during the Cromwell revolution first insisted that even the poor should be able to choose their leaders);
- and by Levelers and Luddites in early industrial England, and by immigrant Wobblies and Jewish labor leaders in Gilded Age America.

Above all, *this* freedom hymn was stewarded for us all by 19th century African slaves under American apartheid,

who knew who Pharaoh was and where the Promised Land was, and who journeyed there by an underground railroad, singing:

- "Go down, Moses, way down to Egypt land..." and
- "I looked over Jordan, and what did I see..." and
- "Nobody knows the trouble I seen..." and
- "Oh freedom, Oh freedom, Oh freedom over me..."

Then these old Jubilee anthems came alive again in the 20th century, in a Civil Rights movement that extended from Selma to Soweto. So a freedom song birthed in a Jim Crow jail was cross-pollinated by the Spirit all the way to the Berlin Wall and Tiananmen Square and the streets of Manila: "Deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome someday!!"

And we can still hear these tunes in our own 21st century: from gay bishops and lesbian evangelists, from Christian Peacemaker Teams accompanying those under the bombs in Baghdad, from Catholic Workers sharing life with the homeless in inner cities, and from so many others. This freedom legacy is borne by every addict who walks the Twelve Steps of recovery, by every sinner who makes that long march up to the altar of repentance, and by every activist who seeks to bring comfort to the afflicted with gospel compassion and to afflict the comfortable with gospel justice.

Sisters and brothers, only those who know their captivity can carry on this Freedom story. We stand in a long tradition of soul searching and struggle. So as the writer to the Hebrews exhorts, "since we are

surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us too lay aside every weight and sin that restricts us so that we too might run this race" (Heb 12:1).

This is the tale of these two meals. They represent God's *extraordinary* invitation to turn the world right side up, coming in the form of the most *ordinary* thing people do: sharing food together around a table. Let us not imagine that these sacred meals are some sort of religious entitlement, or empty ritual, or venue for strictly private spirituality. Rather, when we Christians take this Bread and lift this Cup, let us understand that we are part of a legacy that invites our embrace. For we, too, are part of the ongoing struggle to take back the Freedom story from empire-builders and profiteers, and to restore it among Kingdom-seekers and prophets.

Sisters and brothers, upon these two feasts, representing one great biblical liturgical tradition of remembrance, we can confidently stake our lives, our aspirations, our vocations. And on a faithful practice of meal and memory we *can* rebuild a church that will truly be Freedom Bound, so that the *history* of liberation may also have a *future*. Amen.



The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Ched, and the Andy Thornton Band led the service.

For more information about the Festival:
www.greenbelt.org.uk/festival/.