**Reflection for Sunday 19th April**

**The pursuit of freedom**

**Opening words**

Please light a candle or electric tea light if you are able, and think of all those who are also lighting a candle at this time.

We come together in spirit, free to worship and to pray in the language and the style that means most to us.

We come together in spirit, free to speak our truths and beliefs without any fear of judgement or punishment for our differences.

We come together in spirit, free to mourn our temporary loss of freedoms, and to celebrate the many freedoms that are yet ours.

As we worship today, may we give thanks for our freedoms, and hold in our hearts all those for whom freedom is but a word, and not yet a reality.

**Hymn**

No. 191 in our purple hymn book, called We have a dream, is a song by Michael Forster, based on the speech by Martin Luther King Junior – these are two of the verses;

We have a dream: this nation will arise,

And truly live according to its creed,

That all are equal in their maker’s eyes,

And none shall suffer through another’s greed.

We have a dream that one day we shall see

A world of justice, truth and equity,

Where sons of slaves and daughters of the free

Will share the banquet of community.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love,

We have come together in spirit to give thanks for the many blessings in our life – blessings that remain with us despite the impact of the virus – blessings that are now maybe even more precious than they were before.

We give thanks for our homes, the shelter and warmth that they provide, the collection of familiar, well-loved belongings that they protect, and the sense of comfort and security that they offer. And we hold in our hearts all those who face this day without such a home – those in temporary accommodation or hostels, those in tents and sleeping bags and cardboard boxes on the streets, those living in war-torn, bombed out shells of buildings or refugee camps with no facilities. We pray that one day everyone will have a place of comfort and security that they can call home.

We give thanks for our food – while our access to it has changed, yet there are still plentiful supplies, and none of us face hunger. We acknowledge our ability to buy a vast range of food products, to have well-stocked store cupboards – and we hold in our hearts those facing hard choices between warmth and food, or between feeding their children and feeding themselves. We pray that one day no-one will feel the pangs of aching, constant hunger.

We give thanks for the blessings of families and friends and acquaintances, the myriad shining threads of interconnectedness that are proving their worth so much at present – the letters, phone calls, emails, texts and social media links that hold us all together and remind us that we are not alone even in our self-isolation. And we hold in our hearts all those who are feeling beyond the reach of any connection, whose usual support networks have been taken away, who can see no hope and no friendship. May we find ways to reach out even to those who feel completely abandoned and forsaken.

For our homes, our food, and our friends, we give thanks every day, for we know that we are blessed. May we find ways, even at this time, to do what we can to reach the time when these blessings are available for everyone. For it is by our hands, and through our love, that justice and peace will come. Amen.

**Story – The Caged Tiger**

There’s a story by Christopher Buice about a beautiful, strong tiger who lived proud and free in the jungle. But one day she was captured by a man, taken back to his home and there she was put in a cage. Every day the man brought food out to her, but he also said cruel things to her – that she was ugly, and weak, and cowardly. And over time she came to believe the man.

Some days, as she paced up and down the small cage, she would feel the blood running in her veins, and feel strength building up in her muscles, and she would think about trying to break out of the cage – but then she would hear the man’s voice, telling her how weak and helpless and pathetic she was, and she would sink back down to the ground, feeling that she was indeed helpless.

Then one day, as she was lying sadly on the ground, a lioness passed by and spotted her in the cage. She came over to speak to the tiger.

“Why are you lying in that cage, dear tiger?”, she asked.

“I am held captive here,” the tiger answered, “and I am far too weak and helpless and cowardly to try to break free – how can I get through this cage?”

“My dear tiger,” answered the lioness, “those locks on the door are just for show, they would never hold against your strength. Look at you – strong, beautiful, lithe and graceful, with all the power of the jungle in your veins. One push against that door and you are free!”

The tiger was almost too scared to believe the lion, but then once more she felt the blood running in her veins, and the strength building in her muscles – and before she could think too much about it, she jumped at the door – and the door gave way before her, and she was free.

“Thank you so much,” she gasped, “I would never have had the courage to break free if you hadn’t been there to help.”

“My dear tiger,” replied the lioness, “it’s not just cages that can keep us captive. Sometimes the strongest prisons are the ones in our minds.”

**Reflection**

There’s a lot of talk about freedom – and the lack of it – at the moment. A lot of our freedoms have been curtailed in the name of public health – our freedom to meet, to shop, to exercise, to work, even to worship together have been severely limited and restricted. We understand the reasons for this, and most of us are accepting of the ‘cages’ that we are now in, particularly those of us deemed as high risk who are not allowed to even leave our homes for over 12 weeks – but still we hanker after our freedoms.

But it left me wondering about the nature of freedom. Firstly, there’s the difference between ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’. ‘Freedom to’ is similar to a set of rights – freedom to believe, freedom to gather, freedom to travel, freedom to worship, freedom to speak our truths. In some ways it’s a very practical type of freedom. ‘Freedom from’, on the other hand, is a much more philosophical approach – freedom from fear, freedom from hunger, freedom from oppression, freedom from abuse.

In the present pandemic, we are being asked to sacrifice some of our freedoms – freedom to gather, freedom to travel – in order to try to protect other freedoms – the freedom from fear of infection, or freedom from hunger because others have swiped all the food off the shelves before you could get there after a double twelve-hour shift at the hospital. So maybe our freedoms are always having to play some sort of balancing act, and at different times in our lives some freedoms will be curtailed in order to protect others. After all, a parent curtails a child’s ‘freedoms to’ in all sorts of ways, in order to protect their ‘freedoms from’ fear, or injury, or hunger etc. Erika A Hewitt, in the Chaos chapter of ‘Sparks of Wonder’, wrote,

“we’re primed to speak of “freedom,” and to reflexively protect our right to exercise free speech. We’re enamored of freedom as concept and practice, and chafe at its narrowing—even in principle. When we study history, however, we learn that freedom is rarely freedom for all, and is more often freedom for some at the expense of others….. At times, we’re called to surrender some of our freedom in order to serve The Whole. How might members of our communities be harmed if we give freedom a greater value than responsibility?”

You might find yourself thinking of the greed of the panic buyers, or the selfishness of those who continue to gather and party, despite all the health advice, as ones who put their own freedom above collective responsibility.

Because that’s the other way of looking at freedom – the interplay between right, and responsibility. In our society, we view many of our freedoms as an inviolable right – we have a right to gather, a right to travel, a right to eat what we want, a right to worship when and where and how we want. So curtailing our freedoms equates to taking away our rights. And certainly there is a reason to be vigilant, during a time when the government is requesting many powers that it does not normally have, that those powers to curtail our rights are handed back just as soon as they can be. It would be easy to slide into authoritarianism – indeed in America there are already clear signs of that, and it wouldn’t be too hard for that to happen here too.

But rights and freedoms bring with them responsibilities and obligations. If we in any way believe in the interconnectedness of the human race, and indeed of all this earth, then we cannot hold our personal freedoms up above the needs of everyone else. Anywhere we look in our society, some people have more freedoms than others, while others suffer loss of freedom – because they don’t have the ‘buying power’, or because the people or the way they love is seen as less acceptable, or because their skin or their hairstyle or their language or their country of birth is seen as a reason to discriminate. And yet all of us are equal in worth, even though the way our society is structured means that we are not equal in opportunity or resources.

But if we are as interconnected as we believe, then that saying is true, that reminds us that no-one is free until everyone is free. A century ago, the Universalist minister Clarence Skinner wrote:

The fight for freedom is never won… Each generation must win for itself the right to emancipate itself from its own tyrannies, which are ever unprecedented… Therefore those who have been reared in freedom, bear a tremendous responsibility to the world to win an ever larger and more important liberty.

So while we are in this situation of lockdown and restrictions, if we believe what we say, and say what we believe, then we must work in any way we can to help those on whom the burdens fall more heavily – to give them freedom from fear, freedom from hunger, freedom from poverty, freedom from a sense of abandonment. When the threat of the virus has reduced enough, we should work in any way we can to return those ‘freedoms to’ to each of us. But through it all, and in the years after, we must never stop working, by our speech, by our work, by our very living, towards the goal that all people live with the same ‘freedoms to’ and ‘freedoms from’ – and that each person recognises that with rights comes the responsibility to practice care and compassion, and to help freedom grow in every corner of the land. In some ways, it’s a never-ending journey, because there will always be imbalance, but we can take comfort in knowing that many others have walked that path before us, and many will continue to walk it after we have done our small stretch.

Remember the words by Nelson Mandela;

I have walked that long road to freedom.
I have tried not to falter;
I have made missteps along the way.
But I have discovered the secret that
after climbing a great hill, one only finds
that there are many more hills to climb.
I have taken a moment here to rest,
To steal a view of the glorious vista
that surrounds me, to look back
on the distance I have come.
But I can only rest for a moment,
for with freedom come responsibilities,
and I dare not linger, for my long walk
is not ended.

But there’s one more aspect of freedom to consider – the aspect touched on in our story. The freedom from the restrictions we place upon ourselves, the prisons we put ourselves in, the barriers we put up around ourselves. It’s one thing to say we need to consider how we behave, and be prepared to modify our behaviour so that we are not just indulging our own freedom but working towards the freedom of all. But in some ways this can work against ourselves if we allow it to spread into being someone other than who we are – if we feel unable to ‘let go’ and be our true selves, release the inhibitions and let our true colours fly. One of our ministers, while giving a lecture at Hucklow Summer School, talked about how for many years she had felt compelled to ‘act white’, to bury her true nature as a black woman – and how as a result, for many years she had felt ‘imprisoned’ within the persona she had created. How it had taken a lot of work to let the real ‘her’ out, the one who sang and danced and clapped, and wore bright colours, and called out ‘Amen’ and ‘Alleluia’ during worship services when she felt moved to do so.

We all do this in one way or another at some time in our lives – some more than others. But part of freedom, our personal freedom, is to live authentically, without having to hide, without feeling diminished by the voices inside our heads, or indeed the voices around us that tell us not to behave in certain ways, or dress in certain ways, or love in certain ways, or whatever other instructions they give. There’s a phrase that’s been attributed to all sorts of people, and no one really knows who it belongs to, but it’s beautiful:

Sing like no-one is listening.

Love like you’ve never been hurt.

Dance like nobody’s watching

And live like it’s heaven on earth.

Freedom. A simple enough sounding word. A complicated balancing of reality. But a vital part of the journey towards us living honest, compassionate, authentic lives, and each living thing on this earth being seen as of equal value and worth, and treated as such.

**Blessing**

May we each find ways to be our own, authentic, free self – and create a heaven on earth where all people can be free – free from fear and hunger, free to gather, to worship, to speak, to learn, free to be their greatest, truest selves. Amen.