



The Second Sunday of Easter  
27 April 2014

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## Freedom Day

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

**Readings: Acts 2.14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1.3-9; John 20.19-end**

Twenty years ago today the first elections with universal adult suffrage took place in South Africa. Since then 27 April has been marked as Freedom Day – a public holiday. I want to reflect with you this morning on what Christians might mean by the term Freedom Day and in the process think about how best to mark this momentous anniversary.

Apartheid began as a theory, programme and theology of racial segregation, a way of dressing up a crude and ruthless policy to protect Afrikaner ethnicity, culture and prosperity. But by the end its most evident justification was that without it there would be a bloodbath followed by black tyranny. In other words there were widespread and in some cases genuine misgivings that democracy was actually possible in South Africa. But those misgivings were based on a misunderstanding of democracy.

The simplest form of democracy, its etymological sense and the model practiced in ancient Athens, is the rule of the majority. This sounds wise, fair and just, but in fact it's none of these things. It's not wise, because taking votes all the time is a very clumsy way of decision-making, and the detailed working-out of good and appropriate legislation is best done by people set aside for the task. It's not fair, because, as Benjamin Franklin put it, this kind of democracy 'is two wolves and a sheep voting on what's for dinner.' The wolves get what they want and the sacrifice of the sheep elicits no sympathy from anybody. That's not a good system of government. And it's not just, because it's so easily manipulated. Populist politicians will simply offer democratic majorities some simple, emotive policies to gain their support and insert into the small print a deeper agenda assuming, often rightly, that not a lot of people will notice. Which is why some of the most oppressive nations in the world today are, technically, democracies.

And if this kind of democracy was what the apartheid regime in the seventies and eighties believed would be its successor, then its argument for its continued existence, however unjust its rule, has a modicum of plausibility. But this isn't the only kind of democracy in the world today. Another kind is also problematic, but rather more widespread. It's the kind that regards democracy and capitalism as synonyms, promotes untrammelled freedom to trade and, if you're a multinational conglomerate, almost complete licence to operate without any significant government regulation. The wealthy person's freedom from constraint is the poor person's vulnerability to be dominated. During the Cold War, the nations regarded as allies of the West were by no means all healthy democracies: but what they had in common was permission for the free movement of capital and thus a culture in which often unscrupulous western interests could continue to flourish.

And that was the equation by which apartheid continued to be tolerated by the West: because of the fear of descending into the most chaotic of the first kind of democracy, the West upheld the second type of regime, as part of a global policy of controlling mineral-rich nations and preventing others falling under Soviet influence. But this reduced the political options to a choice between mob rule and neo-colonialism. Which impoverished the whole debate. More positively, for those involved, it meant the anti-apartheid struggle was never just about overturning racism. It was about exposing a whole form of global domination and expressing a richer notion of democracy.

At this point you may be thinking, 'What's all this got to do with the resurrection of Jesus, and the Sunday after Easter?' Well this is the point. When Thomas sees Jesus and puts his hand into Jesus' wounds and touches the risen Lord, he says, 'My Lord and my God.' Why is this moment the one John chooses to make the climax of his gospel? Because 'My Lord and my God' wasn't just any old phrase you uttered when you saw something awesome. In Latin, 'Dominus deusque' was a title of the Emperor. Thomas is saying to Jesus, 'The Emperor isn't Lord of heaven and earth – you are.'

Ever since Thomas' declaration, Christians have had difficulty turning his claim about who Jesus is and where true power lies into a truly engaged democratic spirit. The most common mistakes have been either to say Jesus is Lord of heaven but not of earth, and thus retreat into a spiritualised notion of power, leaving the world untouched, or to say Jesus is in charge so the church must be too, and to seek political power for the church's top brass, or those closely connected to them. And so the apartheid regime was propped up by a mixture of these two errors, with some people conveniently saying the church shouldn't be involved in politics, while for others the Dutch Reformed Church was pulling the strings behind the scenes. So the theological question is, what does the power of God revealed in the resurrection of the crucified Lord mean for democracy?

And this brings us to a richer notion of democracy than those I've been describing hitherto. Democracy doesn't mean the tyranny of the majority or the manipulation of the electoral system by the power élites. The transfer of power in South Africa would not deserve to be called Freedom Day if it simply replaced one kind of elected tyranny with another. It's not real freedom if the oppressed simply replicate patterns of domination once they attain positions of power. You can't be free if you're generating justifiable hatred and resentment in others, because those reactions will rebound on you sooner or later.

Democracy isn't just about a ballot box. In fact voting is more about giving power away than claiming it. Democracy at its truest means a series of practices by which citizens find and exercise power in ways that liberate themselves and others while dominating no one. Perhaps the most significant of these practices is the formation, administration, and appropriate enforcement of just laws – laws that ensure no one is subject to arbitrary domination and that everyone has liberty to flourish in body, mind, and spirit. But laws, while vital, are only the beginning. To make the most of their opportunities, citizens need to organise themselves into associations with their own rules, roles, processes and expectations. It's these associations that give citizens real power – power that as individuals they could never access. Such groups ponder what it means to live in a community that doesn't exclude people and in a society that holds its members and leaders accountable. This church is one such association. Through the politics of this church, every one of us can play a role in the commercial, charitable and cultural life of our city and nation. The way we participate in the life of this church is probably more significant for the true democracy of this country than the way we vote. Everything we do together here is modelling and training us for the renewal of our entire society to become, perhaps for the first time, a true democracy.

So when we celebrate Freedom Day on this twentieth anniversary, we're not just celebrating that the second kind of democracy was removed in South Africa, or that the first kind of democracy, that so many feared, never came to pass. We're reaffirming our belief in and commitment to work for this third kind of democracy, where we enter a new world where no one is any more excluded and no one can any longer be dominated and where everyone is engaged in patterns of life and relationship that release energy and creativity and expression and organise those gifts to build structures of power that strengthen accountability and propagate flourishing and freedom.

And that's a challenge to Christians in this country. Because it's all too easy to adopt a tone of lament about the second kind of democracy. It's tempting to develop an educated cynicism about the power of global capital, the flaws of public representatives, and the weakness of political institutions. It's cool to wear the right T-shirt, drive the right car, and eat the right food. It's

become almost normal to make symbolic gestures and occasional donations and to retweet slogans or read outraged blogs. But while fostering this lifestyle liberalism one can find oneself never meanwhile being willing to commit to any association that has clear expectations and methods of building coalitions of power that might provide a genuine alternative and real challenge to the forces that dominate our world.

The practical passivity that says we don't really know how to help people avoid exclusion and domination can easily coalesce with a disengaged otherworldliness that assumes faith is about heaven and not about earth. Together they deliver our society over to others who mean us no good. We don't really have the right to be critical of the global-capital kind of democracy or fearful of the mob-rule kind of democracy if we're not fully invested in constructing the third kind of democracy. If we have questions about South African democracy today, they shouldn't be pious or sentimental ones that assume a regime of domination and exclusion can easily be replaced by one of flourishing and freedom; they should be rigorous ones that scrutinise the rule of law and hold office-holders accountable to promises made and duties carried out.

The theological issue about democracy is more or less the same as that about resurrection. Resurrection isn't the end of something, as if the struggle of Lent is over and Easter is a one-day wonder of wish-fulfilment. The 50 days of Easter are more challenging than the 40 days of Lent, because resurrection has given us freedom from sin and death and committed us to the hard work of life in church and kingdom based on the possibilities now open to us. God doesn't hand us those possibilities to us fully-formed: that wouldn't be glorious, abundant life, it'd be infantilisation. In the same way democracy doesn't fall into place the day oppression is cast out. 27 April 1994 wasn't so much the end of apartheid as it was the beginning of democracy.

Did South Africa really want democracy, or just the end of apartheid? That's the question for every South African this Freedom Day. Do we really want resurrected life, or just the dismantling of sin and death? That's the question for us, as Christians, every day.