

This week has been rich in conversations for me. I have been lucky enough to meet with, and talk to people I would otherwise not run into. Some have been to do with the building work, others have been to do with strangers and chance meetings. This has been a week when people have seemed unable to stop themselves telling me about their inner life!

Perhaps because I read through the passages of Scripture set for the coming Sunday, I might listen more through the perspective they offer into living a holy life. So it seemed to me that these passages, particularly the little bit lifted out of Paul's letter to the Galatians, had things to say.

You are free in Christ

I heard at length from one man who was very caught up in a family dispute. A family member was being treated unfairly by the family matriarch. "Granny Marjie" had taken a dislike to, or perhaps was pulling a daughter-in-law "into line". There was a chill in the family atmosphere. Joanie could not rest or find inner peace. She felt all caught up and unsure what to do, or say, or not say.

Caught up. It sounds like a bird in a net. She had no freedom. Whatever she might do could have consequences. She was lying awake worrying about which path would cause the least damage, and how she could avoid being hurt herself.

This is what is called "being un-free" in spiritual terms. It is like your sweater being snagged on a thorn bush. Something has caught you.

Paul says that *we are free in Christ*. What does that mean for Joanie? How does she find that freedom?

First she has to find what is making her un-free. This is hard to untangle. When you are snagged you tend to pull harder. But getting un-snagged means feeling your way towards the thorns you are trying to escape from. Getting free means looking inside your soul and asking what is getting hooked. For Joanie it could be a number of things. She really wants to please Granny Marjie. That is because Granny Marjie is a bully and everyone is frightened of her. Living in fear of a person makes you unfree. She really wants to support her in-law who is in trouble. They have become friends in this family and have raised kids together. She doesn't want to seem disloyal. Fear of not looking good in someone's eyes makes you unfree. She doesn't want to talk to her husband about it for fear of dragging him into it. Letting things come between you and a person you love makes you unfree in truth.

Live by the Spirit

William lost his job and lost his house and got into debt. Not his fault? Just bad luck? It doesn't matter. Married with two daughters he was close to panic. He was worried sick and didn't know what to do. He had tried everything, but nothing worked and no one he knew could help him. I asked him what he had done. He told me that he had prayed. He said that he told God the whole story, all the details, all his fears and hopes and anxieties. He told God about his wife and children and about his shame at being out of money. God did not answer him. There was no booming voice. But what William did receive was a feeling of both exhaustion and of giving up. Oddly, not negative or despairing, but like a too-heavy load slipping off his shoulders. He said that he just gave the whole mess to God. He recognized he could not fix this. He gave away his efforts to dig himself out and asked God to show him. "And then the miracles began to happen." he said. He chose to believe that God would get him out of the hole that was too deep for him, and that is just what followed. A job advert caught his eye, he applied and had just the skills they needed. A

neighbour heard of a cheap apartment coming up for rent, they got it. Just as everything had fallen apart it began to fall back together into something new.

But the greatest gift in all of this was the freedom William felt. He was not battered down by feeling it was all up to him. It was up to God, and he was set free from all his helpless anxieties. He could stand up, in the presence of God, and offer praise and thanksgiving. He was living, day by day, not in his own plans and strategies, but in the Spirit of God, in trust and faith. That was what he told me.

The Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I was talking to a minister from another denomination. He was in a difficult and divided congregation with a history of conflict. Because he was new there he felt very off balance when he had arrived. The power brokers of the church had all tried to get him onto their side, and the stories each told about the other made his hair curl!

He had consulted with colleagues and looked through Church Leadership Books. But none of the techniques seemed right.

Gradually he decided that he would not let it all get him down. So he decided he would look upon each grumpy old curmudgeon with the love he hoped God had for them. He decided that he would only focus on things that were joyful about the church when the grumblers came to grumble. He would be patient and kind. After the first week he was exhausted! He told me he had bitten his tongue so many times that he had chewed half of it off! His wife booked him in for a massage at her clinic. He imagined it was Jesus working the knots out of his soul! It was not without pain, as a good massage never is, but he felt looser at the end. He decided, on the massage table, that he would believe that this was Jesus's technique and that it would work. He decided to have faith. It was a conscious decision. He would be generous in his opinions, and kind in his assessments of his people. I was very impressed. "How is the church?" I asked. "Oh, they are still a bunch of grumps," he said, "but God has time on his side, and so do I, I think."

You are free in Christ

What makes you feel un-free? Can you notice the feeling inside you? Can you risk looking at the things you just want to pretend are not there? Can you believe that Jesus wants you to be free?

Live by the Spirit

Do you think it is possible to hand over some, or even all of your anxieties and worries to God? Do you think you can come to see yourself as God's assistant in the running of your life, not the other way around? Can you trust your profound need for safety to God?

The Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Has it ever seemed anything but foolishness to actually live out what Paul calls "the fruits of the Spirit"? We expect these fruits to just fall at our feet one day, but maybe we actually already have them, and the challenge is to live by them right now! If we live by the fruits of the Spirit then the life of the Spirit will grow within us .

You are free in Christ.....already

You can chose to live in the Spirit now. You don't need to wait.

The way to live in the Spirit is easily within your grasp. But again it is a choice and a commitment to change your ways.

The Kingdom of heaven, as Jesus said, is not far away, but it is among you, it is within you.