

The background of the slide features a stylized, wavy pattern of the French tricolor (blue, white, and red) and the Union Jack (blue, white, and red). The colors are arranged in a way that creates a sense of movement and depth, with the French flag's colors appearing more prominent in the center and the Union Jack's colors appearing more towards the edges.

# **Liberte!:**

**What does the Bible say to  
revolutionary French and  
uptight Brits about real  
freedom ?**

**A talk by Laura Nelson  
Women's Brunch at St John's  
Saturday 4 November 2023**

## **Liberté! What does the Bible have to say to revolutionary French and upright Brits about true freedom?**

Galatians : 1 – 6

I wonder which you picked as your favourite quote about liberté, freedom?

Let me add a quotation. This one's from the Bible, from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to a church in Galatia:

***“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery!”***

We love talk of freedom...

But it's a bit of a trap because freedom and being set free might mean quite a different thing for each of us. Maybe you realized that discussing the quotations around tables. Each of us has a different definition of liberty, depending on our own background, history, personal struggles and beliefs. Freedom means something quite different right now for a hostage in Gaza, than it does to a feminist in Paris or a journalist in Russia, or an insecure British teenager.

So **first** I want to think about what we women, in Wimborne or in Paris, might mean when we aspire to be truly free. What your friends, neighbours, colleagues mean.

**Then** we'll see what Paul means in Galatians.

And **finally**, how the two connect.

So first, for modern women in a democracy, who have the vote, what is the freedom we still long for?

...two main ways people talk about wanting to be free are:

**the freedom to let go, and the freedom to be who I want to be.**

You see it in books, films, adverts. We could call it Elsa freedom (character from the film Frozen) and Judy Hopps freedom (brave and optimistic rabbit from the film Zootopia).

What does Elsa sing on her mountain top?

Don't let them in, don't let them see  
*Be the good girl you always have to be*  
*Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know*

*Well, now they know*

*Let it go, let it go*

*Can't hold it back anymore*

*Let it go, let it go*

*Turn away and slam the door*

*I don't care what they're going to say*

*Let the storm rage on*

*No right, no wrong, no rules for me*

*I'm free*

Or the Jenny Joseph poem 'Warning !' written in the 1930s:

*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple*

*With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.*

*And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves*

*And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.*

*I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired*

*And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells*

*And run my stick along the public railings*

*And make up for the sobriety of my youth.*

*I shall go out in my slippers in the rain*

*And pick flowers in other people's gardens*

*And learn to spit.*

*You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat*

*And eat three pounds of sausages at a go*

*Or only bread and pickle for a week*

*And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.*

*But now we must have clothes that keep us dry*

*And pay our rent and not swear in the street*

*And set a good example for the children.*

*We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.*

*But maybe I ought to practise a little now?*

*So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised*

*When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.*

Who hasn't dreamt of just letting it out, saying and doing whatever you feel like, without any constraints, any rules, any expectations? Just one day even where you don't need to set an alarm, cook a meal, hand in a project, reply to emails, check on the kids, be careful what you eat, be sensible with your money. Just let it go.

But, our icy princess finds herself in a 'Kingdom of Isolation'. Or in French she sings "Le froid c'est le prix de ma liberté ». Is that really freedom then? Worst of all, even miles away in the mountains, Elsa can't really let it all go without hurting others, hurting those she loves. So do we really want that kind of freedom? Is letting it all out going to make anything better?

The other kind of freedom people care a lot about today is **the freedom to be who I want to be**. To define myself. Without others putting me in a box or labelling me. The more extreme versions resist all kinds of definition: we can choose our sexuality, choose our gender, choose our pronouns.

But even without those extremes, am I happy to be known as Lucie's mum, Carolyn Jarvis's daughter, Mme Casterat's English neighbour? Is that who I am, what defines me? Or is it unhealthy to be defined by my roles with regard to others? Feminists as far back as Simone de Beauvoir fought the idea that being a 'woman' is a label that defines me, limits me. "On n'est pas né femme, on en devient. But poor Mme de Beauvoir. What would she say today? After decades of telling girls not to let others define them, it is even worse! The way it's done has changed. Now it's your Facebook status, the number of likes your latest photo gets, it's the pornographic expectations of young men who send rude and derogatory messages on WhatsApp groups. Whatever we might long for, our desperate need to be approved, accepted, admired by someone else remains our Number One Enemy when it comes to fighting for freedom.

So although our society longs for various kinds of freedom. It's feels impossible to be free.

But let's come back to the verse from Galatians. Because when we first read it, we can latch onto the word freedom and fill it with these

21st century meanings. Does Jesus enable me to feel free, to let it all out like Elsa or to define myself without caring what others say?

We need to read more carefully to see what he means by freedom. For that we need some context.

Read Galatians 5: 1-6

We are obviously slap bang in the middle of a controversy. Not a Disney film! Paul is tackling head-on false ideas that the Galatian Christians had swallowed. And he doesn't hold back. Let's look at both sides of his argument, the negative and the positive.

**The negative: All religion makes us slaves. The positive: Jesus Christ SETS US FREE.**

### **1. All religion makes us slaves.**

Is that a bit shocking? Especially to hear in a church?! But that's really the meaning of what Paul is saying in these verses. Perhaps we need to explain what we mean by "religion". Paul says in verse 4 "you who are trying to be justified by law, have been alienated from Christ ". By a religion I mean that – trying to be justified by law – in other words, ***any human system or institution that seeks to distinguish who is or is not acceptable to God by reference to a list of rules and rites.***

The debate in the church in Galatians is not a debate about how Jesus saves us. It's not that simple. If you read this letter in full you will see that all Christians agreed that following rules can never make us acceptable to God. We need Jesus to die on the cross in our place. He took our sins (all the evil we have done) upon Himself and paid the price for us. He suffered God's judgment in our place. **The question is what do we do next?** As we see in v1 they were freed by Jesus. But there was a risk of them returning to slavery!

In 2016 President Hollande pardoned a woman called Jacqueline Sauvage. She was in prison, sentenced to 10 years, separated from her three daughters. But on December 28th 2016 the French President intervened to free her, he granted her a total and immediate pardon. A few hours later she left Reau prison, in Seine et Marne, a free woman. Lots of tears, lots of joyful family reunions and

the hope of rebuilding a life, a future. But imagine if that same evening there was a “knock, knock” at the heavily reinforced door of the prison, and the guard found Madame Sauvage there, and through the small window she asked politely if she could go back to find her room. It's unthinkable. **Once we are free, we never want to give up our freedom, normally. But that is what the Christians in Galatia were doing.**

Why is Paul talking about circumcision? Well, at the time most of the early Christians were Jewish, including Paul. So they had been circumcised, as God required, as a sign of belonging to his chosen people, his children. But now Jesus, a Jew, had announced that **anyone** could become a child of God. And it's not by becoming Jewish. It is by faith in him, and he sends us his Spirit to 'mark' us. That's the only mark that's needed. No need to remove a piece of skin. No need for a temple, for sacrifice, for the law of Moses. In the years following Jesus' resurrection, Jews and non-Jews discovered the joy of total forgiveness through Jesus. For the Jews, their laws had never resolved their basic problem. No-one ever managed to follow them (have you ever tried to keep the 10 commandments for even a day? Impossible!). Now through Jesus they were fully forgiven ! And those who were excluded before, the non-Jews, can be children of God too, on an equal footing with his historical people. Also, through Jesus. However, some Jewish Christians began to pressure their non-Jewish friends at church. Imagine Simeon (Jew) talking with his friend Claudius, sat next to him at the Sunday morning service. “Claudius, it's so great that you are a child of God like me. But... don't you want to get circumcised now? God's law in the OT shows us how to please Him. It shows the best way for us to live. Now that you are his child you should surely follow his rules and all the rituals found in the OT. » Claudius wants to take the whole Bible seriously. He wants to live as a child of God, to please his God as best he can. He starts to doubt.

Then the pastor opens the letter that Paul has just written to the church “2v4, 2v21, 3v3, 3v26 – 29, 5.1 -2”

Simon suddenly remembers an urgent appointment he has right after church and he runs off. Claudius stays at the end to talk with the pastor, a huge weight off his mind!

Why does Paul come on so strong though?

Because, look at v 3, the law is a package. It is a whole. If we start operating with this system - following rules and rituals to please God - we lock ourselves into a system which is incompatible with the freedom that Jesus offers us. V4 explains that there are two possible operating systems for a relationship with God. Number one – we try to be justified by the law. Number two, it's at the end of the verse. The operating system of grace (grace means that everything is a gift from God, Jesus did everything to make me righteous and gave it to me freely). Two operating systems. Incompatible. We cannot mix them up, or say 'I become a child of God on the basis of the gift of Jesus. But now I will move forward and live my faith based on following rules.' It's one or the other. If we enter the 'legal' system where I try to earn my standing with God by following rules, I am 'fallen away' from grace (v4). And while the framework of grace carries us all the way, the framework of the law is a red herring. V4, we end up alienated from Christ. Because we can't follow the law! It's too hard for us!

To go to the United States for example, to cross the Atlantic, there are two options. Which are affordable. Either I can take the plane. Or I can swim. If I take the plane I go to Charles de Gaulle, I take my suitcases. If all goes well, me and my suitcases get into a Boeing or an Airbus and we take off. For 6 or 7 hours I have dinner, I watch a film, I take a nap, I read a book. The plane takes me to New York and I get off the plane at JFK to explore the city. If I swim, I go to Les Sables d'Olonnes maybe, I put my luggage in an airtight backpack, I get dressed in a wetsuit and I start swimming, swimming, swimming. And... I'm never going to arrive. It is not possible. Even for me, a top athlete. Two options. For the first I am carried from one end to the other, for the second it is up to me to do everything. You can't start by plane and then, halfway there, say "well, I'll take it from here!" and jump out of the plane. But that's what these Christians wanted to do

in Galatians. And religion today is still offering the same disastrous wrong turn. I start off by being carried (grace) and then I want to take over now. And I dive in, certain to drown...

Well, I have been Christian for 30 years + and I have never been pressured to follow Jewish laws. Maybe it seems like a bit of a debate from the past?

I'm not asking you to raise your hands, but who has ever felt like they're being ambushed by the demands of the Christian life? The message is "it's by grace, it's a gift, Jesus did everything, you can be forgiven, accepted." And then you say 'yes' and it's, 'Okay, here's the long list of rules, requirements. To be a true child of God you have to check these boxes, you have to sign up for these activities, you have to give so much money, you have to be part of these groups, you have to go through these rituals.

It's a bit like the prizes you "win" in a draw: "You have been selected, Mrs Nelson, to receive a week's vacation in the sun, as a gift, free!! And then you accept the gift and we tell you all the conditions. You'll have to pay for the flight, the insurance, the tax, and then sign up for this, that... We feel like we've been tricked. And we're not wrong.

Maybe you've also felt like that in some churches sometimes, or at Christian events or watching a talk on YouTube. Of being tricked. The message seems wonderful: "forgiveness, freedom, being a child of God. Jesus did everything for us! Eternal life is guaranteed!" We sign. And we are given the following pages of the contract. It's free, but... a true Christian must go through this series of rituals. To truly please God you must follow these rules. You have to give so much money. You have to commit to such a program. And you walk out with an even stronger feeling of guilt than before!

The first thing I want to say is 'sorry' if you've felt this. While studying this text, I realized that I sometimes put pressure on myself and others, define Christians in relation to what they do in church, insert rules into the way I live my faith and above all judge my status or the status of others in relation to these rules. Although I know that St John's church doesn't teach that, nonetheless even in a great church,



Christians can sometimes act like that, or talk like that, and we shouldn't. Paul shows us how wrong that is. There are two operating systems. Two modes of transport. Either I function in a logic of following laws, of earning God's approval. Or we are acceptable to God solely on the basis of grace, of what Jesus did, from A to Z. From the moment of our first decision to follow Jesus, to our last day on earth, and for eternity! If you are under the impression that being a Christian means following a list of rules, Paul tells you to flee those ideas. You are right to find that off-putting, to reject a kind of constant guilt, and a pressure to perform, to justify yourself by what you do, what you give. That is not the message of Jesus. It is not the authentic Christian faith. It is a human religion. And human religion makes us slaves.

So what is the alternative? How can I avoid this slavery? Where is true freedom found? Paul says it is in **Jesus Christ**. His mission was **to make us free and keep us free**. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

1. All religion leads to slavery
2. Jesus Christ sets us free

## **2. Jésus Christ sets us free**

Jesus Christ came to live, suffer and die on earth in order to make us free, permanently free. We are slaves by nature. Maybe you don't agree. I don't want to say that we can't make real choices, follow our desires, accomplish wonders, defy stereotypes. But according to God, we are enslaved to this obsession of seeking to justify ourselves, to be acceptable by our own means. Because within us there is something that knows that 5% or even 50%, 60% is not enough. In the only category that really matters, we cannot hope for a pass with distinction. Not if the jury is divine and knows the state of our hearts, of our thoughts, of our close relationships, of our words... **Jesus came to free us from this weight of failure**. Jesus is the only living person who always deserved full marks: perfectly good, full of wisdom, full of compassion for the needy, always speaking the truth, his thoughts always pure and generous. Why kill **him**, so undeniably good? The

answer we find in the gospels is that Jesus went to death on purpose to take our failures upon himself and to give us his perfect CV instead. An exchange. This is the freedom he gives, the grace, the gift, that Paul speaks of with such urgency. A clean sheet, a clean criminal record, a perfect standing before God. But, he doesn't give us this freedom, this gift, for us to flip back into thinking like a slave. A way of thinking where we try at all costs to raise our spiritual average to get his attention, or to reassure ourselves that we are at the top of the class.

Some here have always been top of the class. It's hard to accept no longer operating on this basis. But with God, it doesn't work. He couldn't care less. You don't get any special attention from this teacher.

Some here, on the contrary, have suffered rejection after rejection. Maybe for no good reason – where you were born, someone you trusted who abandoned you, your genetic make-up.

**Jesus Christ invites us all, whether we are used to being the first or the last, to change our operating system completely.** He invites us to a profound freedom. The freedom of knowing, day after day, whatever happens, that he loves us, that he accepts us on the basis of grace. Not just at the start, but Sunday after Sunday, Monday after Monday. There is no external sign or rite of passage or list of rules or job title that can improve or confirm this status. Read v5 with me. It is by faith and by the Spirit that we await the righteousness we hope for. If V4 summarises a religious operating system, 'trying to be justified by law'. V5 is the Jesus operating system, of freedom, of waiting for righteousness. It's a gift. It comes from God. I trust him.

So...back to Elsa and Judy Hopps. I criticized the selfish attitude of 'Let it go...' a little but that's not the end of the film. In fact, Elsa knows deep down that she is not free or happy. She is still a prisoner of her turbulent emotions and is cut off from those she loves. But... the real heroine, Anna, is ready to sacrifice herself for her sister. And that sacrifice transforms Elsa profoundly so that she is truly liberated. Freed from fear and hatred to be able to express her power without it

being dangerous. At the beginning her emotions are repressed, in the middle they are released, but in the end they are transformed. Well, it's Disney, you can't go too far. But there is a small parallel nonetheless. Freedom to let it all go doesn't work, it is dangerous and selfish, without a transformed heart. The answer to feeling repressed isn't just release, it's transformation. The freedom that Jesus proposes is the freedom to be accepted as I am first, and then, through the power of his sacrifice, to be transformed from the inside out.

And the freedom to be who I want to be? For any girl who wants to just be herself but finds herself as an adult more Brigitte Jones than Judy Hopps, always anxious about how others see her, about her romantic status, or her weight while desperately wishing she wasn't... **We, and our children, need to know that we are accepted and loved as we are.** We don't have to prove anything. The one who knows us from A to Z, our creator, he loves us and approves of us, while knowing the worst. And it is not because I have proven myself, but because Jesus made himself a slave to give me my freedom.

Maybe like me you are very concerned that your daughters or granddaughters are growing up in a world that constantly labels us. People you've never met think it's ok to hurl insults or crack jokes about your physical appearance on social media. It's harder than ever to feel good about yourself. What I pray for Lucy is that she will be so assured of the approval of her Creator, every day, on the sole and solid basis of the righteousness of Christ, that she really could not care less about what others think and even what she thinks of herself. Sometimes our own perfectionism is just as harmful as the demands of others, right? What I pray for her, I prayed for all of us in preparing this brunch – that everyone of us should experience the freedom we are talking about here. The freedom to be defined by God, by his already given judgment, and by no one else.

Do you know people like that, who are truly free? I can think of two or three remarkable friends who have a sort of humble confidence, free from worrying about the opinion of others, sincere and serene.

And what's incredible is that these people are the people I know who give the most for others. In his argument in this letter Paul goes to extreme lengths to convince us that following a religion made of rules is a catastrophe. Maybe you're thinking, "but there is no longer any motivation to do good. The church has always operated by carrot or stick. Good points in the sky on one side and beneficial guilt on the other. Paul is going to demobilize his own troops!" But look at v6 at the end of our text. Christian freedom does not lead to laziness. Christian freedom leads to love. Freed from the burden of having to justify and prove yourself, and transformed by the Spirit, you can truly begin to live for others. I don't need to be top of the class, or even to be noticed by others. I can joyfully put myself at the service of my brothers and sisters, or of my neighbour. My ego no longer needs attention, so I get to work to glorify the God I love.

I need to hear and rehear these words from the Bible as much as you do. And our friends and neighbours desperately need to hear about this real freedom that Christ gives. French men and women, so obsessed with freedom, but so frustrated and lost – they need to hear about it and see it in action. Let's never forget. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then in this freedom.