

Bible Study: Two Women who are free.
(Joshua 2, v.1-21 and John 8,v 2-11)

Madeleine Rüedi-Bettex

On agreeing to present a bible study in July 2003 in Prague, I suddenly realised what a daunting task I had accepted. The word freedom in a Czech context brought back memories of a visit to a camp in Teresin where our friend Jaro showed us round. It was 10 years ago at the end of our first "Medicine of the Person" session in Prague. Over the entrance to the camp there was the inscription "Arbeit macht frei". Ever since my childhood, I have been horrified by the incredible fact that one human being can be enslaved by another, reduced to the state of a productive machine, constantly under threat of being destroyed and sent to the rubbish tip. How can one speak with respect of freedom in this country in the heart of Europe when, like myself, one comes from a peaceful country that has escaped from the torments of war?

In my search for texts in the Bible dealing with freedom, I picked out two stories relating to two women: Rahab in the Old Testament (Joshua 2,v.1-21) and a woman accused of adultery in the New Testament (John 8, v.2-11). Rahab lived with her family in Jericho where the story took place, just before the city was attacked by Joshua at the head of the Israelites. She was to play an essential part in the future of the inhabitants of Jericho and of the Israelites. The adulteress, for her part, lived at the time of Jesus, and was to serve as a lure by the scribes and pharisees to catch Jesus out.

Rahab chose sides. She offered hospitality to two foreigners, Joshua's envoys. The king learned of the presence of the spies and ordered Rahab to deliver them up. But she hid the visitors, lied to the king's messengers and set them on a false track to keep them away from the city. Then the city gates were closed.

Rahab took risks - told lies, hid spies, committed treason. Did she act out of fear or to help her customers by safeguarding them? She said it was from loyalty and she explained it by saying: "I know the Lord has given you this country The Lord, your God, is the God of the heavens above and the earth here below." She spoke of this omnipresent God, not as of an idol, but as the Lord, and she was free to recognise his power. She was therefore wise enough to negotiate her services: "Swear to me in the Lord's name that you will also be loyal to me and that you will protect my father, mother, brothers and sisters, and save them from death."

Having obtained this promise, she arranged for the guests to escape by a cord hanging from a window, as her house was built into the city wall. A bright red cord, suspended from the same window would be the sign to ensure the protection of herself and her family when the Israelites attacked.

Rahab acted out of loyalty to her guests. She decided to make use of her freedom by becoming a traitor to her king and to the town. She chose to be on the side of this God whose powers of protection were shown in favour of Israel in a way that amazed the inhabitants of Jericho.

Rahab may appear to be an ambiguous character. We do not get a clear picture of her: she is described as a prostitute and, at other times as an innkeeper whom the Fathers of the Church held up as an example to others, as having justified herself by her actions. She is portrayed as a courageous woman who saved the lives of her family, as being loyal to her guests. She ran the risk of being condemned for high treason by the king of Jericho.

In the story, she, an inhabitant of Jericho, becomes an ally of Israel. There can be little doubt that her recognition of the Lord "who is the God of the heavens above and the earth here below" changed her life completely and proves that she has a place in the genealogy of Christ. She is quoted by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus, where she appears as the mother of Booz, Ruth's husband and David's grandfather.

The story of this woman whose life was threatened by the destruction of her town by the Israelites, and who was saved from it at the last minute, has a counterpart in the New Testament story, told more briefly, of the adulteress, whose name is not revealed, and who also experienced an extreme situation.

We know that she was caught in the act of adultery, brought to the temple and placed in the middle of a circle of people, where Jesus was teaching. This was in conformity with the law of Moses which, according to the scribes and pharisees, stipulated that such women were to be stoned. They tried to confound Jesus by asking him: "And what do you say?"

Jesus could have returned the question by asking, for example: "And where is the guilty man?" for the law of Moses was egalitarian and provided for both men and women to be stoned. But his answer went beyond the legal texts. He leaned down and started to write on the ground, and when the pharisees insisted, he straightened up and said: "Let the one among you who has never sinned throw the first stone." The accusers all left and the woman was left alone with Jesus, in the circle. He freed her with the awe-inspiring words which restored her dignity: "Neither do I condemn you. Go in peace and sin no more."

Rahab and the adulteress both found themselves caught at a difficult moment in their lives. The former acted, making the most of the freedom she had, whereas the latter had none. Terrified, even when her accusers had disappeared, she remained waiting for the outcome. Like Rahab, she needed a clear sign. For Rahab it was the red cord that represented the promise given by Joshua's emissaries. For the adulteress, it was the words of her saviour, addressed to her personally. Both are finally unconditionally justified. Their experiences changed the course of their lives, their futures opened up and they regained a position of respect and dignity in society.

Jesus did not merely preach in the temple, he acted, at the risk of his life, to rehabilitate the woman and free her from those who disparaged her, and from her past. Most certainly it was his words that saved her.

What is the meaning of freedom as far as Jesus is concerned?. He speaks to his disciples in John 8,v.31-32. "If you live in accordance with my teaching, you are really my disciples, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free". The truth means that a literal interpretation of the law is not enough; it must take on an extra dimension, that of love, to take account of the individual and his circumstances. The line of conduct outlined by Jesus for his disciples and for all human beings prefigures the love that God manifests to them, and which, far from creating restrictions, gives them complete freedom. This is seen when Jesus feels free, for example, to cure a sick person on the sabbath.

What a difference between the truth of which Jesus tells us and which brings freedom, and the truth or truths that certain people claim which enslave others and judge their conduct. Examples can be found among ideological and religious sectarian groups where doctrine is considered more important than personal need.

Loving is an act of freedom. Agreeing to follow a new way of life, off the beaten track, involves freeing ourselves from our usual contingencies and daily routines. It is to be born again.

If I aspire to freedom, and even more importantly, I am called to be free in accordance with the message of the Bible, what is there to interfere with my personal freedom?

Obviously, there are exterior constraints that limit it. Political authorities such as those who ordered Rahab to deliver up her guests. May I not, like her, disobey, find a way out or find allies to give more power to defend a more just cause?

What seems to me even more important are my interior constraints, similar to those of the adulteress, divided in her inner feelings. How difficult it is to be free. I am perpetually torn by voices within me that try to tear me apart. Sometimes flattering, at other times deprecatory, they make me doubt and reduce me to helplessness. Therefore my task must untiringly be to recognise who I am in all that, to make myself whole again so that I can respect myself without judging my imperfections and recognise myself as a whole person.

My freedom is fettered through my ignorance of myself and unexpected outbursts such as fits of temper and indignation. I cannot put up with evasive attitudes, all the more irritating when I discover them in myself, after first seeing them only in others. It is painful to admit that I do not correspond to the ideal image I had of myself. Discovering hidden aspects of myself and accepting that they are part of me leads me to a better understanding of myself and others and enables me to take a really understanding interest in them.

My personal life is part of a historical line. I am a stage in an inheritance. Where is my freedom in the context of what my ancestors have handed down to me? Recognising what has been beneficial in order to maintain it, and on the other hand managing to define clearly what have been the causes of suffering, sometimes for generations, and what has been hidden to avoid shame or public criticism - suicide, alcoholism, infidelity. Discovering the shady ideas I nurtured concerning my family, the phantoms that may disturb us, in order to accept them with understanding and humility. In these ways, I think I can innovate without betraying my ancestors.

In a period of depression, I suffered hell. I saw myself in the faces of the condemned. I was torn apart, helpless, in mortal danger. I only managed to recover with the help of a guide who accepted me with patience and kindness, which enabled me to discover, in the very depths of my being, like a pilot light, a glimmer of freedom. Thus, it could spring up, lighting up a corner of my darkness, and finally continue to spread all through me. As if Jesus' message to the adulteress was for me: "Go and sin no more." meaning: eliminate the divisions within you, take care to heal the rifts.

I can appreciate in my private life all the blessings that have flowed from this experience of freedom regained. It has also been invaluable at times when I help people in distress. It encourages me to believe in the future even in cases where there appears to be no solution. It has helped me to love, to love without judging others, to consider these people as unique, as worthy as myself. From such an encounter, in spite of the sufferings we may share, often spring feelings of fulfilment and gratitude, renewed confidence in life. It is on such occasions that I can say I feel the presence of God like a murmur.

My share of freedom is, of course, small. Even when it is reduced to an insignificant portion, it is my most precious possession, to be preserved at all costs, because it is the sign of my link with humanity. The feeling of co-responsibility is a direct consequence of my freedom; it is not my responsibility which limits my freedom. This recognition of the freedom I enjoy is what shows me that I must share it with others. Have I to share it with God as well?

I can decide to leave room in my life for the mystery of God. Rahab acted freely when she decided to be on the side of the God of the heavens above and the earth here below. The adulteress is called to go forward in life when encouraged by the words of her saviour. Today the misfortunes of the world to which man is subjected make people doubt that God is free to intervene in their lives. God appears to have delegated all his freedom to men. If this is so, then my small share of freedom takes on even greater value.

I wish to join in Etty Hillesum's prayer to God. Etty was a young Dutch woman who volunteered her services as a helper in the transit camp at Drenthe in order to share in the fate of her people. When she was later deported to Auschwitz, she and her family died there. During her detention, she wrote: "I will help You, my God, not to die in me, but I cannot guarantee anything in advance. However, of one thing I am more and more sure, that is that You cannot help us but we can help You. Yes, my God, You can probably not modify a situation which, finally, is indissociably linked to this life ... It is up to us to help You by defending to the end Your abode in us.

Translation: Myriam Haldimann