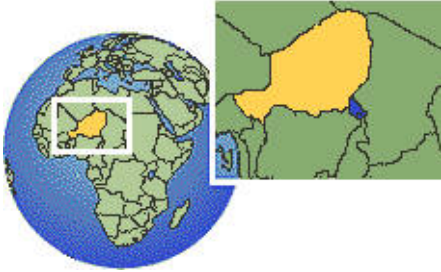


## SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN THIS WORLD

Sermon by Dorothy Mair Reader in the Church of Scotland

Before I came home from America in May, I was shocked one day when watching the news.

For I saw that a young woman from Niger called Hadijatou Mani in Africa was taking out a court case against the Niger government. The reason for this was that she had been sold into slavery as a child and kept for almost 20 years from her family. Slavery was abolished in Niger in 1960 when it became independent from France. Then it was prohibited in 1999 and criminalised in 2003, making it illegal for anyone to have a slave.



The minimum estimate is that 43,000 people are in slavery across Niger. 10,000 slaves are in Malawi and there are still 600,00 slaves in the world. Slaves have no rights and no opportunities in life. In Niger, people are born into slavery and forced to work without pay for their so-called masters throughout their lives, herding cattle or working on farmland, or as domestic servants.



Slaves are denied fundamental rights, and their masters exercise powers of ownership over them. Slaves are inherited, and given as gifts. Children may be taken away from their mothers at an early age. Girls are forced to start work as domestic servants at a very young age, and are at the continual beck and call of their masters.

They may be sexually abused by men in the household or forced to marry at a young age. Women have spoken of living in constant fear of abuse, and rape is common.

Masters also consider that they have the right to demand the marriage dowry of their former slaves (which may consist of a bed, a tent or kitchen utensils). When a former slave dies, the master can demand the inheritance, even if the former slave has children. Even when former slaves have been free for many years, the master will assume the right to approve their marriage or inherit their property.



Many slaves are not on the electoral roll, and so are not entitled to vote. This political exclusion enables those in power to maintain the status quo. And this is the year 2010 when I thought we were more enlightened people.

In our Old Testament reading, King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem had made an agreement to set free their Hebrew slaves. So they all agreed and made a sacred covenant - or promise - to God to free their slaves. But as we read,



they changed their minds and they wouldn't let them go - they must have seen how much they would have to do if they were freed.

And this angered God. So God decided to give them freedom - but freedom in a different way - the freedom to die by war, disease and starvation. And nothing has changed in 2010, has it ?

We continue to have the freedom to fight nations and to die by war -more British soldiers died this week in Afghanistan. American troops were ambushed and several died in Iraq. What sad waste of lives.

The people of the Congo continue to flee as soldiers have the freedom to fight . Disease spreads in our world - sexual freedom produces unwanted babies, Aids, cancer, even hidden diseases in hospitals through germs.

Greedy countries force children to starve around the globe while we live and eat and buy as much as we want, when we want. Many of you prepare to go on holidays at this time of the year - we go to another place and buy and eat and buy and eat - and if it's a cruise, it will be an eating marathon.



Is this what our Lord meant by giving us freedom ?

Is freedom real or imagined ? Harry Houdini, the famous artist, issued a challenge wherever he went. He could be locked in any jail in the country, he claimed, and would set himself free in a short time. He always managed until one day something went wrong.



Houdini entered the jail in his street clothes. The heavy metal doors clanged shut behind him. He took from his belt a hidden piece of metal which was strong and flexible. He set to work immediately, but something seemed to be unusual about this jail lock.

For 30 minutes he worked and got nowhere. An hour passed and still he had not opened the door. By now he was covered in sweat and panting in exasperation, but he still could not pick the lock.

Finally, after two hours, Harry Houdini collapsed in frustration and failure against the door. But when he fell against the door, it swung open ! It had never been locked at all !

But in Houdini's mind it was locked, and that was all it took to keep him from opening the door and walking out of the jail cell.



Today many people are like that - their minds and their bodies are slaves to so many things and they just cannot see the freedom they can have if they want it. If they push the door, they'll find it open.



What kinds of slavery do we have today ? There is the slavery of cigarettes, of drinking too much in secret at home or in pubs at the weekend. There is that longing to stop smoking, to stop drinking but the addiction - the slavery is there to have just one more.....

There is the more dangerous slavery of drugs - starting with just simple non addictive pills to clear that problem, sometimes leading on to more and more highs until people become total slaves to their addiction and just have to have more and more. What slavery comes from a simple opium poppy grown at the other end of the world.



There is also the slavery of sex - the need for a physical high which can lead to so many things including the slavery which prostitutes find themselves in - and the dangers of diseases.

Then as we see and hear on TV often, the slavery of violence - the continual beating of a small baby, the high they got from hitting a defenceless child - animals get that as well. Paedophiles take freedom also to hurt children. Missing children are reported every day around the world - kept as sex slaves to grown ups.

Slavery can also be seen in materialism - the need for more and more things - for more hi tech toys, more gadgets, the bigger and bigger TV, the more powerful car - or the more exotic holiday, bigger and better than the neighbours, each year. Two days ago I was in Young's jewellers on College bounds in Fraserburgh and a mum was trying to choose something for her son's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. "I jist dinna ken fit tae buy him, she said - a ring wi' a few diamonds on it, a big thick gold chain, a personalised number plate? Oh me, fir dis he want ?" Perhaps some love and attention ? Being slaves to all these material things, held captive by them.



A young boy was always catching and caging wild things. He particularly liked the sound of the mocking bird. So he decided to catch one and to keep it in a cage so he could hear it sing any time. He found a very young mocking bird and got it into his cage outside his garden. On the second day he saw another bird fly to the cage and feed the young bird through the cage bars.



This pleased the young boy. But then the following morning he found that the little bird was dead in the cage. He never knew why until he grew up and an ornithologist told him "A mother mocking bird, finding her young in a cage, will sometimes take it poisonous berries, She thinks it is better for the one she loves to die rather than live in captivity like a slave.

In Peter's first letter to the early Christians, Peter spends time warning the people about being slaves to their emotions. He warns them to be careful of how they act, to show a good example to people they meet, to do good deeds and to allow those who are not Christians to see how good the life of a Christian can be.

Our Lord says that to us today. A person who becomes a slave of a destructive habit, becomes a slave if he or she cannot conquer it.



The only slave we should all be is God's slaves, living within the confines of our faith and the rules of Christian behaviour, but also living - not as a slave in the way we think of it, but as free people.

God says to us this morning : respect everyone, love your fellow believers, honour God and respect those in authority in our country. This is how we should all live our lives enjoying the freedom of worship, of prayer and intimacy with Jesus.



In 1838 slavery was abolished on the island of Jamaica on August 1<sup>st</sup>. On the evening of the last day in July, a large company of former slaves gathered on the beach for a solemn yet a joyous occasion. A large mahogany coffin had been built on the sand and placed on the sand next to it was a deep hole. All evening the slaves placed symbols of their slavery into the hole.

There were chains, leg irons, whips, padlocks and other symbols of being held as a slave by a master. A few minutes before midnight the coffin was lowered into the hole in the beach.

Pushing in sand to cover the hole and what they had put into it, a huge crowd of slaves sang, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below, praise him above ye heavenly host, praise Father son and holy Ghost." The clock struck twelve. They knew they were freed from their slavery.



How much they were like Christians, who through Christ's death are freed from their slavery of sin. And how like them are Christians who in heaven shall be free from the very reminder of sin.

And so one thing which we might reflect upon this morning is what it is that we now are blind to; who is it now whose suffering we cannot see, cannot understand? In some societies it may be women or old people, it may be children. It may be minorities of one kind or another. It may be that in our wealthy countries - that we do not see the reality of suffering and injustice in so much of the world. And we may not know for a long time just how many things we have not seen. But at least we can begin to pray 'Lord, open our eyes'.



It can take a long time. John Newton, the writer of the hymn "Amazing Grace" was someone who had been a slave trader. And even when he was converted to faith in Jesus Christ, for a while after that he went on selling slaves. Slowly, the Gospel opened his eyes to the sufferings of those alongside him. So, we pray 'Lord open our eyes' and we pray 'Lord, let it not take the whole of our lives for our eyes to be opened.'



When love opens our eyes we can see God's love; we can see what we have never seen before - the freedom of the love of God towards us in the face of Jesus Christ.

And because of that we can see ourselves in a new way; we see ourselves as helpless, as poor and hungry in the presence of God's love. And yet we see ourselves as infinitely precious in God's sight. And then because of that we see others in a new way.

Not our enemies, not people who are threatening us, but gifts from God; and so we begin to be able to set about the task of setting others free. The chains, the shackles of our own fears fall away.

'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear and Grace my fears relieved', says the hymn. First of all when I see God's love, I may be frightened - I haven't deserved this - how do I receive it? And then it is the same Grace that relieves and takes away those fears.



And so we Christians who seek to make the love of God, let the love of God be real in our lives; we look for signs that remind us; signs of the covenant.

John Newton lived to be a very old man. For many years he worked as a priest in London. His teaching, his sermons his hymns, inspired many in the struggle against slavery. But in old age he said to one of his friends these words: 'I am a very old man and my memory has gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Jesus is a great saviour.'



We are great sinners, we live so often in blindness; we do not truly see ourselves; we hide from those things in ourselves which we can't manage.

As we resolve to pray that God keeps our eyes open, as we resolve to pray to remember those things, let us ask God to make us a sign of hope in the world, let us ask God to help us see in ourselves and on the world what we would prefer not to see;

Let us ask God to make us free so that we may make others free and above all let us give thanks today and tomorrow and every day for the love we cannot describe or explain. Let us give thanks for Amazing Grace, and let us remember that we shall never come to the end of what can be said about the love of God:



'When we've been there ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we'd first begun.'

Let us not forget what he gives us, let us not forget what he calls us to do, what he calls us to share in his world: in our freedom'... two things:

I am a great sinner and Jesus is a great saviour.'

To his name be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

Let us pray :

Thank you Father, for our freedom to love you and to worship you. We are all great sinners. Thank you for being a great Saviour.

Blessing written by John Newton :

Grace to live by

Grace to love by

Grace be yours

and grace be mine

Sins forgiven,

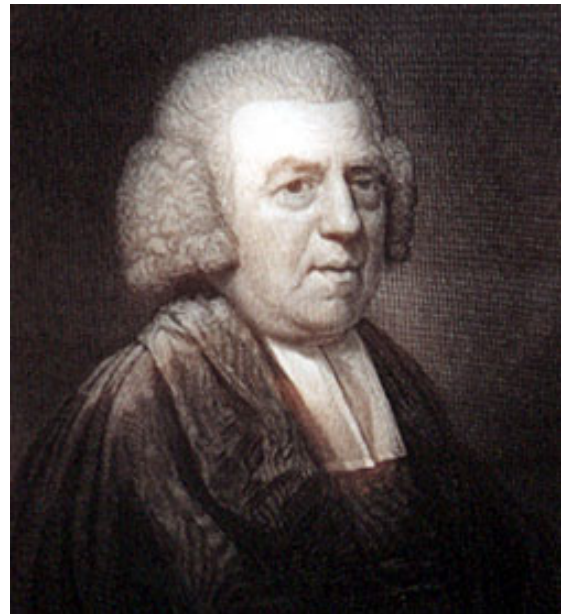
great our Saviour

For each day

our freedom given

May God bless us all the time

AMEN



**John Newton 1725-1807**