

FREEDOM

The Terrifying Freedom of the Lord

Steve Motyer

Irvin Yalom, one of today's leading psychotherapists, tells the story of a friend who pulled into a burger bar in California and picked up the little ketchup sachet to anoint his burger. Whereas normally such sachets would have a corner labelled "Tear here", the Californian version was "Tear anywhere!"

We live in a world in which the options are enormous, and the pressure of choice can be unbearable. British schools have generally (and sensibly, I think) not gone the way of French and German schools, and abandoned uniforms. Why? Because our children are already under huge social pressure. Can we really add the pressure of turning each day into a fashion parade, with winners and losers?

Freedom is actually terrifying. Anyone who, while feeling depressed, has stood in panic in front of all those different sorts of coffee in the supermarket will know what I mean. Please deliver me from the responsibility of having to choose one of them! Take me away from all of this!

It's not just a matter of the pressures of modern life. In the terror of choice, we touch on something very profound about our whole existence on earth. Whether we like it or not, we make our lives here.

On a global scale, it's obvious. When we finally choke the life out of our beautiful planet and try to explain to the Creator that it was just the build-up of greenhouse gases which led to that catastrophic warming that produced such flooding that led to armed conflict over dwindling oil supplies that finally provoked the nuclear exchange that ended it all ... it's not hard to imagine God's quizzical, uncomprehending 'Why did you do that? Why didn't you choose a different path?'

But it's not so obvious on an individual level, that we similarly make our lives. So often we feel locked into situations that we think we can't change, and we parcel out the responsibility – it's my genes, my punishing father, my angry wife, my poverty ... It's more comfortable to feel that we are helpless, than that we have freedom! I'm not saying that abusive parenting and violent relationships don't have awful consequences in people's lives. But often counselling focuses on helping people to find their power. What will they make out of the terrible things that have happened to them? Can they embrace responsibility again? Can they move from the terror of being trapped into the – even greater? – terror of being free?

We have a God who called Abram out of his comfortable life in Haran onto a wilderness journey to ... anywhere. Abram didn't know. And Scripture makes that the pattern for our life of faith, too! Can we cope with the freedom to decide where to place our next step? The freedom is only bearable because, for us, that freedom wears the face of Christ, the face of a loving God who calls us to share with him the vast adventure of building a universe.

Steve Motyer is Course Leader of Theology & Counselling at London School of Theology and Lecturer in New Testament and Hermeneutics.