

There was a remarkable event in the world of broadcasting last week. The Radio Four programme *Real Lives* on Dr Johnson to mark the 300th anniversary of his birth. In this programme, Johnson's religion – specifically his strong and lifelong Christian faith – was barely mentioned. It was as if you would present a programme on Albert Einstein, but without the physics, or Alex Ferguson, without mentioning Manchester United. Perhaps this was something to do with the fact that *Real Lives'* presenter is the militant atheist Matthew Parris.

The reason I mention the great Samuel Johnson is partly to pay my own tribute to him but particularly to say that he was very much engaged all his life with the notion of freedom, what it is to be free. We in Britain need urgently to ask this question today when our national government is largely impotent under the general control of the EU; when we are threatened with the introduction of identity cards which, apart from the wasteful expense, will in effect force us to prove our citizenship in our own country; when we are not allowed to drink a glass of wine in a public park. Metropolitan do-gooders on their £140,000 salaries want to ban the advertising of drinks. And well-to-do doctors would like to raise the price of booze so that pensioners and other poor people will not be able to afford it. Well, the definition of a man who drinks too much is one who drinks more than his doctor. A Boy Scout may not carry a knife. And before we take a group of children for a game of football in the park, we shall have to be vetted and certified to ensure we are not paedophiles.

This latest invasion of our private lives is deeply offensive and profoundly irrational. It is offensive because it requires innocent people to prove their innocence – which is against the whole spirit and letter of our legal system. It is irrational because it can never guarantee safety to the children it seeks to protect. I mean, what form does the vetting and the assessment take? All it can show is that you or I have not been convicted for child rape or murder in the past: but every paedophile has to start sometime. One could pass the vetting procedure and then take to molesting children.

The notion of freedom has been corrupted by our consumer society and our culture which is generally given over to mere amusements. In this culture of therapeutic narcissism, the shiftless, the rootless and the brainless have been encouraged to think that their desire to just what they want, when they want it, is guaranteed by fictitious elements going under the name of *rights*. Most talk of rights is twaddle – because all the so called *rights* come into conflict with one another and in any case there is no right which does not impose a duty on someone else. So if I have a right to play what is misleadingly described as *music* at top decibels, it means you have a duty to put up with it; or you have the right not to, and I have the duty to pipe down. But the brainless me-ism of contemporary life does not understand this.

The corruption of the notion of freedom has also come about because we interpret this in a particular and individualistic way. Actually, there are no absolute individual rights, beyond the right to life itself. And freedom must be seen in the context of the whole community. Freedom cannot be merely *for me*. Freedom must be *for us*. Individual freedom must operate within a free society. This is obvious and it is the political aspect of the commandment to love our neighbour. While I'm at it, there is another piece of nonsense which ought to be exposed here. Have you noticed that usually those who talk so loudly of *freedom* are the same people who talk of *changing society*. This is nonsense because to change society you have to change people and to try to change people is to impose upon them, to challenge their freedom.

This whole discussion which I have begun today is regarded as extremely serious by all the politicians and media pundits. Actually, it begs a huge question: it takes for granted and assumes that human beings are in fact free. And this is where Dr Johnson and his Christian faith have something to say to us.

When he was still a young man, he wrote *The Vanity of Human Wishes* in which he said that all supposed *rights*, all that we will for ourselves, are essentially corrupt. We think we are exercising our freedom when all we are doing is thrashing about in acts of self-will which are useless, vain, empty. It is not external restrictions on our freedom which are the problem: it is our own inability to will those things which we know, in rare moments when we escape self-delusion, we ought to will.

Johnson knew that the heart of man is always set on the wrong things. And he knew that the remedy is penitence. One Good Friday he confessed simply:

I have made no reformation. I have lived totally useless, more sensual in thought, more addicted to wine and meat. And give me grace to withdraw my mind from unprofitable and dangerous enquiries, from difficulties vainly curious and doubts impossible to be solved. Let me rejoice in the light which thou hast imparted. Let me serve thee with active zeal and humble confidence.

In *The Vanity of Human Wishes* he urged us:

Leave to heaven the measure and the choice...Implore God's aid, in his decisions rest...Secure whate'er he gives...He gives the best. Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind, obedient passions and a will resigned

There is a wonderful phrase: *obedient passions*. Our true freedom is not thwarted by prohibitions which bear upon us from the outside but by our own flawed desires. As Johnson confessed, he was *a slave to vicious habits*. A Christian understands that this is what he is like, and, like Johnson, in his best moments, he asks God to deliver him from himself. There is tremendous irony in the way that we scream for our freedom and demand our rights, when it is

we ourselves who are in the wrong. Freedom depends upon freewill. And it is our wills which are corrupt. As St Paul said: *The thing I would not, that I do; and what I would I do not.* As one of the great Collects says, *We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.*

The only way out of our slavery is to turn daily to God in our prayers and to ask him to deliver us. And he has told us what the means are to our deliverance. We must will what he commands and desire what he promises. All the other so called *roads to freedom* are dead ends. This daily imploring God to repair and restore us is the only way. We must ask him to inculcate in us good habits. St Augustine knew that this is a continuous task: you will not become free in a day. *You must become*, says St Augustine, *υποκριτης a hypocrite* - the Greek word for an actor. The way it works is that you pretend to be good until you actually start to become good. It is just like piano practice or learning a language.

The paradox of grace is that there is no freedom without surrender to God. The most extreme assertion of rights apart from God in the last hundred years was that of Jean Paul Sartre at the end of what he titled his *Roads to Freedom* trilogy in which the protagonist, ends up exercising his complete freedom, up on a roof, machine-gunning passers-by. Atheistic quests for freedom are nothing other than Satan's ambition as described by John Milton: Satan would *rather rule in hell than serve in heaven.* We don't have to go to those extremes. We notice our pursuit of a delusory freedom in every infant throwing a tantrum when he doesn't get his own way; in the surly resentment of someone rebuked for antisocial behaviour; in our own pique and distemper when we think we're not getting the rewards we deserve. There is no true freedom except that to be found in the obedience of our wills to God.

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom... that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command

