

Year C

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Do you ever wish we could get back to the wholesomeness and stability of the past, to a world where things are simpler and easier? That's just the issue explored in the superb 1998 film *Pleasantville*. The central characters of the movie are teenage twins David and Jennifer, each struggling in their own way with the pressures of modern life and a family that has been through divorce. Jennifer becomes the ultimate party girl, careless and acting on her every whimsy.

David becomes depressed and retreats from the world into his room, where he spends as much time as he can watching his favourite TV show, an old 1950's black and white sitcom, *Pleasantville*. Pleasantville seems to offer everything David could want – simplicity, intact families, stability, clear community values.

Then one day something strange happens. David and Jennifer are fighting over the remote control for the TV and they break it. Mysteriously a TV repairman shows up and gives them an unusual looking replacement remote. No sooner have they hit the button

than they are both transported back in time into Pleasantville, the world of David's favourite sitcom. They find themselves trapped in this world where everything is neat, simple and occurs in black and white. David and Jennifer are part of a traditional family, where mum stays home to do the cooking and cleaning and their clean cut Dad heads off to work, returning each evening with "Honey, I'm home."

David realised that they have become part of the episodes he knows word by word from TV and decides to play along. There is something appealing about this simple

world. Jennifer is horrified. There's no way she'll be going along with the rules. David tells her she'll destroy these people's way of life, but she doesn't care. And the funny thing is that she does destroy their way of life, but in many ways, she changes it for the better.

You see, the reason everything is so pleasant in Pleasantville is that nobody asserts their individuality. Everybody conforms to the desires of the mainstream. Jennifer's Pleasantville mum represses her feelings, the Pleasantville store owner represses his dreams of becoming an artist, the high

school kids go through the motions of winning every basketball game but never know how to cope with failure.

Inspired by Jennifer's chaotic ways people in Pleasantville start discovering their individuality. Jennifer's mum explores her feelings and then one day doesn't have dinner ready and waiting for her husband when he walks in the door. The local storeowner starts painting. The high school kids start breaking out of their rigid conformity. And as all this happens those who begin to assert their individuality turn into colour.

The reaction from the power brokers is swift. Initially confused by all these changes they soon become convinced society will fall apart. They organise meetings, enact laws against “coloureds”, apply guilt trips to those who have changed. A darker, uglier undercurrent of abuse and violence emerges as some who resent the changes retaliate. But nothing can stop the change.

The film raises a whole lot of issues. By the end we’ve discovered that the new full colour version of the world is more chaotic and dangerous than the black and white version. Readjusting to new roles, discovering

morality and living with change is difficult. The men have lost the power and convenience of a world oriented around their needs. Yet people are living in colour. They seem happier and more fulfilled or so it seems.¹

Peter Marshall, the Coatbridge born Scots-American minister of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, was appointed as Chaplain of the United States Senate. There he would often lead in prayer. Once he prayed;

¹ *Pleasantville* 1998 New Line Cinema

“Lord Jesus, thou who art the way, the truth, and the life; hear us as we pray for the truth that shall make all free. Teach us that liberty is not only to be loved but also to be lived. Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books. It costs too much to be hoarded. Help us see that our liberty is not the right to do as we please, but the opportunity to be pleased to do what is right.”

Pleasantville, despite all its apparent progress through liberty, had not understood what the gift of liberty is for.

Rev. Dr. William Harkins, an Episcopal priest from America, wrote about a close friend. He wrote;

“A dear friend and colleague recently died after a courageous, yearlong battle with leukaemia. After numerous hospitalisations, second and third opinions, two extensive rounds of chemotherapy, and a joyful but short-lived remission, the cancer returned with a new vigour and intensity. In consultation with his family, my friend made the decision to cease all but palliative care, and to die on his own life-giving terms. In one of our last conversations he said, “I have

had so much love.” “Yes,” I replied, “there are so many who love you and are grateful for you.” “That may be,” he replied, “but what I mean is that there are so many whom I have loved. I have so much gratitude for the love of God has enabled me to give away.” We were quiet for a few minutes. The he said, “Having made the decision not to continue with treatment has freed me to focus on quality of life rather than longevity. It has given me the freedom to see in a new way how much love there has been, is now, and will be. Love is meant to be given away.

That is what the incarnation is all about.” A few days later, he was gone.²

Freedom is not the absence of entanglements which we may carelessly assume. Freedom offers us the opportunity and the means to become entangled with others through the sharing of love. Love is meant to be given away as William Harkins dying friend perfectly understood. “For freedom Christ has set us free”³; to be free to free others through sharing the love of Christ. It would be tempting to read this passage in Galatians

² Harkins, J. William 2010 in *Feasting on the Word Year C* Volume 3 pp. 184, 186

³ Galatians 5: 1 NRSV

as a list of dos and do nots as if we could make ourselves choose the better option. But we're not able, and even if we were, it's not as simple as that. It's not as simple as saying the flesh is bad and the spirit is good and so let's set aside all fleshly things and immerse ourselves in the spiritual world. What kind of human beings would we then be? - very strange ones! We need to learn to desire properly. Food and drink never killed anyone. It is gluttony and drunkenness that kills. The desire to worship God is good but it can so easily lead us into idolatry. We need to learn to desire properly that we

would experience the freedom to live the way that God intended for us with the sharing of love. It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Amen.