In this Queen’s official birthday service, and in the midst of social and political unrest all over the world during this pandemic, I would like to take the opportunity to speak on a very urgent but appropriate issue: Liberty. We just read in 1 Peter 2.17 *‘As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.’*

Liberty for the truth, proclaimed by the whole Christian tradition since Augustine, is now understood as liberty freely to seek the truth. Liberty of religion has been transformed into the religion of liberty.

Therefore, let us come to study the Christian understanding of Liberty. It is based on the fundamental principles of the Christian Faith.

The Gospel is a call to repentance: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matt. 3.2). This appeal is meaningless unless the complete liberty, spontaneity and sincerity of those who hear the appeal is assured. But nowhere in the Gospels to suggest that the support of civil authorities might help to bring the truth more effectively home to the hearers. On the contrary, Jesus resists Satan’s temptation, in which He is shown the kingdoms of this world and their glory, and He refuses to be made king.

The Sermon on the Mount is often called the ‘law of the kingdom’, that is the ethical teaching of Jesus. But it is also the most searching judgment ever pronounced on a religious conformity, not simply in ethical sense but also in religious sense. The Sermon of the Mount demands the most personal decisions, those decisions which no one can make for a person except the person herself. This is the law of Christian liberty.

St. Paul carries Jesus’ law of liberty further. Christian liberty is not a liberty of indifference. It is ‘liberty from’ and ‘liberty unto’. That is liberty from sin, fear and death, liberty unto love and service. For that reason, the Christian cannot become a tyrannical inquisitor. We can never say ever agree with the idea that it is necessary to destroy bodies in order to save souls.

Christian liberty is the liberty of the Spirit. The Christian must be willing to submit to the judgment of the Holy Spirit. He is willing that the deposit of faith, as we have received it, should be at all times subject to reconsideration in the light of such knowledge as the Holy Spirit may have directed. Our loyalty to the truth which we profess must always leave a place for the correction of our ideas by the Holy Spirit.

If we attempt to translate these principles of the Gospels into certain guiding principles for civil and political affairs, the only position which can be logically based on them is that of liberty of conscience.

Some people may object this logical deduction. The principles of the Gospel are only applied to a community of believers, the civil society consists of sinners, therefore, the principles of the Gospel are not applicable. This is a too simplistic view of the separation of church and society. The Anglican view is that there is such a thing called Christian society which consists of the church, the monarch, the priests, and the civil servants (nowadays we should include politicians) and all people. This is in fact the outline of the Litany in the Prayer Book. Therefore, the church, as a vital part of society has the responsibility to set forth those principles of the Gospel as a standard for civil society. One of the Beatitudes is that we are called peacemakers (Mt. 5.9). This must also mean that we are liberty makers, not simply in church but between men and states and peoples. We must recognize the inestimable value of liberty of conscience, and to secure such liberty for the consciences of all people.

We therefore do not agree with the secular concept that the origin of liberty of conscience is in the human spirit. The Christian agrees there is the liberty of conscience but it is essentially a Christian value. It is simply the application to human life as a whole, of that principle of liberty in Christ, which the Christian has received as a gift through the grace of God. ‘You did not receive the spirit of slavery’ (Rom. 8.15), but of adoption and of liberty. That does not simply mean ‘Stand fast...do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’ (Gal. 5.1). It means rather we have to proclaim to the world the value of liberty; conscientiously and faithfully promote; teach all peoples to trust in it, and to respect it in their fellow men and women. It is only through liberty that the Gospel can lead men to that higher liberty, the liberty of children of God reconciled to their Father and to one another.