

13th Sunday C, Good Shepherd; Holy Trinity; Crucifixion, Glen Burnie Parishes

I. Introduction: Fortnight for Freedom

A. First, let me say once again how happy I am to pay a visit, even if long deferred. It is an opportunity for me to express my gratitude to you for your love of the Lord Jesus and to the Church's mission of spreading the Gospel. I am especially happy to join with you in thanking Father Lou Martin for his dedicated service to your parish.

B. As I visit with you today, the Church in the United States is observing what is called the Fortnight of Freedom - a two week period of prayer for the restoration of religious liberty. The theme of these days is "Witnesses to Freedom" - and during this time we remember the martyrs who died rather than violating their consciences or giving up their faith. Among them are courageous individuals such as St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher whose relics we venerated at the Basilica of the Assumption last Tuesday. We also remember modern-day martyrs such as Christians in the Middle East who are being killed simply because of their religious faith with many others being dispossessed and exiled.

C. In addition, this is a time when we soberly take stock of the ways religious liberty is being diminished in the United States: by government mandates that force religious institutions and individuals to act contrary to their deeply held religious beliefs; by pressure on hospitals to violate their ethical standards and on medical professionals to violate their consciences; by so-called 'equality clauses' driving Catholic adoption agencies out of business because they uphold the Church's teaching on marriage; and by efforts on college campus to regard Christian teaching as "hate speech" - ... the list is long, it is growing, and frankly it can be discouraging. Where should we turn? Fortunately we can turn to today's Scriptures which describe true freedom of spirit, God's gift of freedom which no one can take away from us, so long as we stand firm.

II. For Freedom Christ Has Set [Us] Free

A. Today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians tells us about true freedom: "Brothers and sisters," Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." What could Paul mean by the phrase, "for freedom Christ has set us free?" Well, you might say that there are two levels of freedom. The first level is one that we are all familiar with - it's freedom of choice. Our culture highly values the liberty to make personal choices. Some of these choices are good and, sadly, some of them not so good. All around us many voices tell us, "It's okay, so long as it's legal & no one gets hurt." But when we misuse our freedom, someone always gets hurt.

B. Freedom of choice, then, is "standard equipment" of our human nature. Yet St. Paul is taking us to a second level of freedom, not mere freedom of choice but the excellent use of our freedom. He tells us that by sharing our human nature and laying down his life to save us, Jesus has opened the way for you and me to use our freedom well and wisely - in a way that both pleases God and enables our humanity to thrive. We might say Christ is saving us from using our freedom badly - from being slaves to sin and to our passions and appetites, slaves to our possessions or to what we think we want in need. Christ who was tempted in every way that we are tempted, yet never sinned, but instead triumphed over sin and death by his Cross and Resurrection: he has set us free- free to live the truth and free to do the truth. Truly, for freedom Christ has set us free.

C. In the Old Testament we meet the prophets Elijah and Elisha who used their freedom well and wisely by saying "yes" to all the Lord asked. Elijah used his freedom to open his heart to God's Word, as few have done, and became a prophet powerful in word and deed. Elisha, his protégé, was hard at work when Elijah called him. Elisha loved the land he was farming and he loved his family yet he was asked to leave everything and himself become a prophet. Elijah would stand for no hesitation: he evoked in Elisha a deep freedom to immediately lay down everything and do whatever the Lord would ask. Elisha in his turn became a prophet powerful in Word and deed.

D. In the Gospel we meet three groups of people who did not use their freedom well.

First were the Samaritans who refused to welcome Jesus because their freedom was hampered by ancient animosities and grudges between the Samaritans and the Jews. Second is a well-meaning person who wanted to follow Jesus but evidently clung to comforts of life – Jesus told him to reconsider. Third is another sincere person who heard Jesus’ call, “Follow me!” – yet did not feel free enough to leave everything and answer the call. The experience of those we meet in the Gospel tracks our own experience. We want to be free enough to love others and to answer the call of Christ to holiness yet our freedom to do so is compromised by old grudges, hurts, and animosities, as well as the total preoccupation of our daily lives – mine and yours. How we need to meditate on Paul’s words: “for freedom Christ has set us free!”

III. Using Freedom Well to Defend Freedom Well

A. During this Fortnight of Freedom we pause to think of those who have even gone to court to defend religious freedom such as the Little Sisters of the Poor in nearby Catonsville. That we defend our freedom and how well we defend it is of great importance. But how we use our freedom and what we use it for, is even more important. The Little Sisters of the Poor are a good example of how to do both. They have had the courage to go all the way to the Supreme Court to avoid having to violate their consciences. But they have done so not for any selfish purpose but rather so that they could continue serving the elderly and poor in accordance with the faith that inspired their service in the first place.

B. The same is true for us: As citizens we need to defend our basic freedoms for when religious freedom suffers so also freedom of speech and assembly. We need to do this for love of our own country, out of concern for the common good, and in solidarity with those abroad who are laying down their lives for the faith. Like all citizens we can do this by contacting elected officials and by insisting that our government’s laws and policies uphold our freedoms. Important as that is, however, it is not enough. The ultimate way we defend our freedom is to use it well. This means taking the advice St. John Paul II gave us years ago when he said: “Freedom consists not in doing what we like but in having the right to do what we ought.” “For freedom Christ has set us free...” “free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous all the days of our life!”

May God bless us and keep us always in his love.