

AMDG FIRST SUNDAY HOMILY 1ST JULY 2007 YEAR C

Freedom is a key issue emerging from the Scripture readings today. I believe that these Scripture readings give us an opportunity to reflect on what freedom really is for the follower of Christ, and I want to say that, if you have come here looking for answers that will leave you with no further questions, then I am going to have to disappoint you. For what we seek is an adult faith, a deeper reality because we believe that in Christ that adult faith and that deep reality is revealed and found. We believe, with the protagonists of all three Bible stories in today's Mass, that God calls us to freedom and wants us to remain in freedom. For us here this is an adult freedom. We are all adults; mostly, young adults but a few, like me, not so young. We're called to freedom, called to adulthood, called to responsibility.

What then is that freedom, revealed in Christ? Freedom for the follower of Christ contains at its heart a paradox; that true freedom is found not in being free to do whatever we want, whenever we want but in living entirely for others. And we are not compelled to live that way, because we are free; God does not offer us an apparent liberty, all the while controlling us in an unseen way. We are called to freedom by the God who is freedom. Does Elisha in the first reading do what he does freely or, when God calls and names him as the anointed successor to Elijah, is he from that moment onwards unfree and unable to respond in any other way? In order to do what his new life and calling will demand, he leaves his own people and gives up everything he possesses, symbolised in the reading today by the slaughter of his oxen, the burning of his plough, and his giving all his food to his people. In the second reading from St. Paul's letter to the new church in Galatia, St. Paul declares that Christ meant us to remain free; and Paul squarely names the opposite of freedom to be the slavery of self-indulgence. Self-indulgence is named as slavery, not freedom! The strategy to prevent such liberty from collapsing into no more than self-indulgence is equally clearly named; what we must do is to serve one another in freedom, not serve ourselves. For Paul, and keep in mind what he had been before his dramatic encounter with Christ, it was a matter of being guided by the Spirit. Our good intentions sometimes come to nothing, he notes, because we are not always guided by the Spirit. Freedom emerges as a frequent theme in St. Paul's letters to the new, young churches. He was concerned that some were using their new Christianity as a licence to do as they pleased, "freed" from the Law, while others were claiming special knowledge given only to some which, again, allowed them to do as they pleased, they thought. Christ does call us to freedom but not to licence, which is really only distorted self-love. True liberty is located in mutual love.

Called to freedom, called to adulthood, called to responsibility. Living not for ourselves but for others: that is the paradox at the heart of our faith. In our culture we do not easily make commitments to other people. Promises are tricky; promises seem often to be conditional or provisional, despite the language in which they are expressed which usually sounds pretty definite. We find it difficult to keep commitments and promises. This is true of human beings generally but it is particularly true of us in our time. And so we circumvent commitments or postpone promises. But it's not just us. There was more than a touch of that in the Gospel we just heard, when Jesus dramatically and resolutely took the road for Jerusalem; another translation, not the one we use at Mass today, says that he "*turned and set his face towards Jerusalem*". He set his face; he committed, he did so freely, as a responsible adult. Not far down the road, he met a man who said "*I will be your follower wherever you may go.*" And then another who said, more or less, "*But it will have to wait. I have other things to do, jobs to accomplish, other great plans to realise.*" "*Let me bury my father first. . . . Let me return to what I cherish.*" In other words, I am not ready to give it all away. The paradox at the heart of Christianity is that we only begin to be free when we start the process of self-definition that is called commitment to others. And our freedom is only realised when we give ourselves away in love. It is often presumed that freedom is a state of being loose, unattached, free to do as I please. Some people go so far as to think they lose their freedom when they commit themselves. That version of freedom means giving in to any immediate desire and impulse. And yet such a notion of freedom - "giving free rein to the flesh," Paul calls it - is slavery. It alienates us from our true selves, that deeper reality, that adulthood to which we are called. It demands a whole new understanding of freedom, of what it is to be called by Christ and to be free in Christ.

Perhaps there is even a fear involved. The psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl tells us what's involved when we face our true liberty:

"As soon as we lend our minds to the essence of human responsibility, we cannot forbear to shudder: there is something fearful about human responsibility." But he also noted, in the very next breath; "*But at the same time [there is] something glorious. . . . it is glorious to know that the future of the things and the people around us is dependent - even if only to a tiny extent - upon our decision at any given moment.*

What we actualize by that decision, what we thereby bring into the world, is saved; we have conferred reality upon it and preserved it from passing."

In the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, one is drawn to look at what it is that enslaves us, what is it that keeps us from living and loving. The response is truly adult; at the end of the Exercises, after a long process of examining our relationship with God through Christ, and set free from what enslaves us, we can make the Take and Receive prayer that is given to you in the Mass sheet today. Many people who make the Exercises of Ignatius discover the presence of a loving, saving God, not to mention freedom from false gods, to a new appreciation of new, liberating images of God to replace older, distorted images that can trap and enslave. As Henri Nouwen tells us, "[...] *my own true freedom I cannot fabricate for myself. That must be given to me. I am lost. I must be found and brought home by the shepherd who goes out to me*". The extraordinary discovery, which is the grace of the early part of the Spiritual Exercises but also of the whole Christian life, is not that we are lost or abandoned but that there is a One who is looking for us to bring us home. The grace that we pray for in the Spiritual Exercises is to know deeply, not the anger of a God who wants to punish, but the delight of God who wants, more than anything else, to forgive.

We are called to freedom, called to adulthood, called to responsibility. Some of the things we are not free to do are obvious; and they are obvious precisely because we know that we cannot do these things without harming another person; usually conscience reminds us of this if we are in any doubt. We cannot murder, we should not steal; the Ten Commandments covers quite a lot of ground! In our time we have issues arising about our lifestyle in the affluent global north, to which our Live Simply campaign points our attention. Put simply, we are realising more and more that our freedom does not consist of living as we have done in terms of use of the earth's resources, because there is evidence, increasing every day, to draw our attention to the consequences and contrasts. If we continue to live as we have been doing, others will suffer and that's already happening. The motto of the Live Simply campaign is: "*God calls us to look hard at our lifestyles and to choose to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poor. In this way we can help create a world in which human dignity is respected and everyone can reach their full potential. This would be true progress, worth more than economic growth alone*". That motto, and the idea for *livesimply* comes from a prophetic document, written by Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples" (Populorum Progressio) explains what the Church was saying about the growing poverty and injustice of the developing world. Written in 1967, the messages are still loud and clear: "*God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples.*" It's a call for us to live a new kind of life, in solidarity with the community, motivated by faith. That gets us much closer to what it is to be free in Christ; free to be people-for-others on a global scale. In another part of the world of faith, a spokesperson from the Muslim Council of Great Britain today expressed, completely clearly and unequivocally, that there is no theological justification in Islam for terrorism such as we have just seen again in London and in Glasgow. This is correct. Muslim people are not more allowed to hide behind belief or theology than we are as Christians. Shocking things have been done and are still being done in the name of religion, even faith; our Christian history does not escape censure. The sectarianism that tempted James and John in today's Gospel story cannot be part of our response.

So what is our response? Again, I have to say that an easy answer which you can read off from somewhere without engaging personal responsibility is not available here tonight! We are called to freedom, but with that we are called to adulthood, and called to responsibility. Maybe in times past it was easier to get up and leave everything, because there was less to leave. Maybe it was easier to make a commitment because life was less complicated. Maybe we have a more sophisticated understanding, as responsible adults, of our psychological depths, of what motivates us and of what gets in the way. Finally, though, we must all realize our need for prayer, for union with the Christ who calls us and who sets us free. We need discernment to sift out what leads us to God from what keeps us away from God and from our true selves. We're called to freedom, called to adulthood, called to responsibility. We need to pray for the grace to become our true selves, to become fully free, fully adult, fully responsible – and so, fully alive.