

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10

Ps 18

1 Corinthians 12:12-30

Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

The passage we read today from the Gospel of Luke is commonly known as the Nazareth manifesto. In it, Jesus sets out his agenda, by quoting from the prophet Isaiah. And in a key passage, he says that he has come to proclaim liberty to captives – to proclaim freedom to those who are enslaved. Jesus has come to bring us freedom.

There have been many ideas over the years about precisely what is meant by the word freedom. There's a notion of freedom that is commonly promoted today, which centres on the ability of the individual to be in absolute control of the world around them. We can see this idea, for instance, in many of the commercials we are bombarded with on a daily basis. The person behind the new car console or the new computer screen or the new dishwasher is shown as having almost divine power: the devices will do whatever you want at the push of the button. This product will make reality conform to your will, and it will make that happen quickly and easily. You too, can be the master of your universe; you can avoid compromise; you can be completely and entirely free to make the world as you would like it to be.

These kinds of statements are used with great frequency in much advertising today. It presupposes an idea of freedom that is centred on the absolute power of the will – to be free means that I can determine for myself—just as I would carve out a landscape or perhaps design a character in a video game—regardless of the consequences. The size, shape, gender, looks, functioning, and even urges of my own body are all adapted to what I want. And all social interaction is on my terms. The so-called 'liberated' person associates with those who they desire to associate with, determining for themselves at any given moment who will be in their circle of interactions, who they will like, and who they won't.

In hot-button issues like abortion and assisted suicide we see the extremes that such a distorted sense of freedom can lead to. Indeed, it's become common for people to argue that our freedom requires the ability to exercise control over life and death itself. To end one's own life or the life of another human person is claimed to be a choice that the free person must be able to make without reference to others.

Without reference to others, without reference to God, without reference to even our very selves – this is how we are told free people should be able to act. No reference beyond pure, absolute will.

I would argue that this is actually the very definition of hell. Life without reference to anyone or anything. An existence that produces only isolation, restlessness, and slavery. How restless, how lonely, how enslaved we become when our own will is

our master. In time, we cut ourselves off from the bonds of affection, and even reality, as a bloated wilfulness consumes more and more of our lives. Such an existence is entirely caught up with what we want next and how we will get it. In time, we lose the capacity to love, to give of ourselves, to even notice others around us, not to mention the movements of the Spirit. This is the sin of Adam – what we call Original Sin. It is a sin that enslaves, and it is this that Christ came to free us from.

In our Gospel today, Christ takes up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and declares that he brings to fulfilment the promise God made to our spiritual ancestors – he will give liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. His Spirit—the Holy Spirit—offers us the freedom of the sons and daughters of God, a freedom that cannot be found in the passing fancies of this world, or in our own will.

We who follow Christ must strive to be witnesses to this truth about freedom and slavery in our world. Our readings manifest this point clearly to us – freedom is a blessing bestowed on us by God when we follow his will. True freedom cannot be claimed for ourselves – it is the consequence of acknowledging God’s claim on us.

Saint Paul understood the freedom of the children of God better than most. He had been a slave to his own will, and then, through an incredible grace that we will celebrate on Tuesday during the feast of his conversion, he was set free. He was liberated through his acceptance of the will of God. It was as though a weight had been lifted from him. He proclaimed with unbridled enthusiasm: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Not my will, but his! He recognised that this was the source of true freedom. So great was his love for Christ and the freedom that he had found in him that he even rejoiced over his struggles and persecutions, because he saw them as opportunities to crucify his own will and live in complete dependence on God, and in obedience to him.

“Obedience” is almost a dirty word today, but obedience to his Father is the most fundamental characteristic of Jesus’ life.

Before we get to side-tracked over the terminology, it is worth noting that the word “obedience” is derived from the Latin *audire*, to hear. Jesus lived a life of listening to God, actively seeking him in prayer. Communing with his Father in the solitude of prayer Jesus embodies God’s love in the midst of our noisy and chaotic world.

If we are made in Jesus’ mould—as we have been through baptism—the same should be said of us. If we are to advance his kingdom, if we are to experience the life of heaven, if we are to carry our cross, it all must flow from our efforts at listening to God, and obeying his will.

As you’ve probably heard me say over and over: God knows us better than we know ourselves, and he loves us more than we love ourselves, so he can be trusted, and his guidance of our lives can be trusted.

But so many people so often we completely miss this. How often are we obsessed with trying to get our own will done? Even when we pray, we are often just asking God to do what we want. To free us from the aspects of life that we don't like. If we desire true freedom, we would be better off asking God to free us from ourselves. Asking him to help us fully embrace his will, and our place in his Body, the Church. We must strive to follow God's will if we want to be free; if we want to be happy; if we want to love. There is no other source of genuine and lasting freedom.

Only in God are we offered the freedom to be authentic to who we are, to act in accord with who God made us to be. Only in God are we offered the freedom to live in harmony with one another. The freedom to love others as Christ has loved us, joyfully and with generosity.

May God help us to follow the example of Christ and Saint Paul: to desire more than anything to do God's will, and so to win for ourselves *true* freedom.