Homily for the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary time 2026 Year A

Today's readings are very much about the exercise of freedom.

The first reading from Ecclesiasticus puts it very plainly, “If you wish, you can keep the commandments, to behave faithfully is within your power”. Man has life and death put before him, whichever he likes better will be given to him.

I suppose it is true to say that we have become so used to exercising free will and free choice, that we never give it a second thought. Yet it does pose serious problems for us because freedom from something usually makes us free for something else.

We experience our freedom as a great blessing, a blessing that brings with it all sorts of responsibilities, but others can experience freedom and its consequences as a great curse.

If you have ever read Dostoyevsky’s novel The Brothers Karamazov, you may remember there is a very powerful attack against God based upon man’s freedom. One of the characters, Ivan, is arguing with the young novice monk, Aloysha, about the goodness of God and Ivan wants nothing at all to do with Him. He doesn't disbelieve in the existence of God, he just doesn't want to know. Ivan explains to Aloysha why this is. He cites various reports that appeared in Russian newspapers at the time about the sufferings of innocent children. One is about how some Turkish soldiers who captured a village threw young babies up into the air and impaled them upon their bayonets; another is how an officer playfully held his pistol in a baby's face, and when the baby gurgles and reaches for it he just pulls the trigger and blows the child’s brains out. He also gives more examples. Ivan's argument is, “I cannot worship a God who could allow such things to happen”. Aloysha replies that it wasn't God that did these things, it was men exercising the freedom that God gave to them. Ivan argues that that is his whole point. When God gave men such freedom He must have known that some would abuse it and cause innocent children to suffer, and if He didn't know that then He could not be God. Put simply, Ivan's argument is that he cannot see that freedom is such a desirable thing if its cost is even one tear from an innocent child. There is no argument you can put to me, he is saying, nothing about how God will work it all out in the end, nothing about how God uses these contradictions for His own glory

that is worth the tear of an innocent child. God is responsible, Ivan is saying, for giving man such freedom, and he wants nothing to do with such a God. “I shall hand back my admission ticket”, he says.

It is a very powerful emotional argument from a very moral man. Just as Ivan's examples, which were taken from real newspaper reports at the time, so the argument is just as current today. The media can even let us see such atrocities, and it is not just in countries at war, it is the neighbour next door who abuses their child or even beats or starves them to death. Ivan’s argument is all the more powerful because he uses innocent children as examples. They do not deserve to suffer. We, however, well maybe we sometimes do get what we deserve.

There is no convincing reply that you or I can give to Ivan's argument. We can at best perhaps say that we cannot read the mind of God, and that of course is true, but his questions still persists, is mans’ free will worth such a price?

Ivan says “No”, God could have arranged things better. But how? By creating creatures who would always freely choose to do good? That is no answer. It would be a funny sort of freedom if you were made in such a way that you always freely choose to do good, because then you are not free to choose a bad action.

The theologian will say that God made man so that man could respond to Him in love. That response cannot be love if it is coerced in anyway. It is not love if it is not free. Ivan would say, fine, I understand, and accept that, but such freedom is still not worth the tear of an innocent child. It is too high a price to pay.

So where are we? We are left focusing upon what must be the enormous importance of the freedom that we take for granted and the tremendous responsibility that is attached to it. Whether we like it or not, God has given us such freedom, but as Ecclesiasticus puts it, “He has given no one permission to sin. If you choose spiritual death, it will be given to you”.

You cannot avoid the moral responsibility that goes with free choice. There is no middle ground, no neutrality if you are presented with the choice of choosing between a good or a bad cause of action. You cannot sit on the fence. If you avoid making a decision, then that means you have avoided choosing the good, and we all try to sit on too many fences each day. You cannot have freedom without what is the pain and burden of the responsibility. Every

choice, even when we think it is no choice at all, carries responsibility and therefore consequences.

That perhaps is just one interpretation of what Christ was trying to do to His followers in today's Gospel. He was trying to shake them out of their moral lethargy and wake them up to the full implications of the freedom of choice they possessed. He was trying to improve the quality of their moral choices, not just the letter of the law, but the deeper spirit as well, no sitting on the fence, no equivocation, but let your yes be yes and your no be no.

We cannot answer Ivan's questions. To a certain extent his is a false position because we cannot hand back our admission tickets. We are alive, we are in the world, and we are free to make choices, so we have to make sure we appreciate that tremendous gift of freedom and exercise it properly.

All our choices have consequences. We are responsible for those consequences. We cannot only make choices, but we can be generous in those choices. If you are asked to go one mile, go two. Freedom of choice offers us tremendous challenges and responsibilities and all choices have consequences, but if our virtue is no more than the Scribes and Pharisees, minimalism, just what you can get away with, then we will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In God's eyes we are all free, and therefore our freedom seems to be worth the great price of even a single tear from an innocent child, even the suffering and death of God’s innocent son, but that is not to say that God is responsible for the child suffering. The man who abuses his freedom and inflicts the suffering is also the man who will be held responsible by God.

Our power of moral choice, to choose to do good or evil, is a glorious and yet awesome thing. Choose widely and generously for God takes our choices seriously. He respects our freedom. If we choose spiritual death, He will grant us our choice.