

Homily - Third Sunday of Lent (B)

Most of us don't like rules.

Or rather, we don't mind rules until they restrict us and what we want to do.

Children are a great example of this - how often do we see one child report their sibling for misbehaving and then do exactly the same thing just a few minutes later?

We might be older, but we're not that different on the inside.

It's a natural thing to resent the dictates of law, to wish everyone on the road had to follow the speed limit except for us, to want to live by a less restrictive moral standard than that of others.

In the narrative of Exodus, we hear God giving a new law to the now-liberated people of Israel.

It's striking, when you think about it, that one of the first things God does after freeing them from an oppressive power is to give them these new rules - what we quickly recognize as the Ten Commandments.

To understand why God would act this way, we have to consider the true purpose of law in the divine order, most especially that of divine law itself.

In a word, there is a crucial distinction between being free, and being directionless.

The Lord, in liberating his people from captivity, wouldn't have done them any favors by leaving them adrift in the desert, with no point of reference on where to go or how to live.

Instead, he brought them out of a corrupt rule of order, with a power that had bound them in slavery, and gave them a law that would direct them toward their good - even in those times when they would be tempted to rebel against it.

For the people of Israel, as for us as Christians, to believe in a God who created and ordered the world likewise entails a belief that there is an order to how we should exist and live in that world.

Freedom, of course, is a key theme in the history and founding of our nation itself.

Pope Saint John Paul the Second brought this to mind during his apostolic visit to the United States in 1995.

During his famous homily on October 8th at Oriole Park in Baltimore, he spoke of how we, as a nation, needed to remember the purpose and nature of the real freedom we are called to embrace.

“Surely it is important for America,” he said, “that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be passed on to each new generation.

Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”

Not to do what we like, but to have the right to do what we ought.

We see this principle laid out in the commandments themselves.

You can divide them into two categories - principles that tell us how to love God, and how to love each other - the same categories that would become the foundation of what Christ himself would call the two greatest commandments.

The moral and social teaching of the Catholic Church is, in effect, an expansion and application of these fundamental principles.

These laws are not arbitrary - in fact, rather than restricting us, they too lead us to freedom as individuals and societies by showing us, through the reflection of the magisterium and the guidance of sacred tradition, how we can best live out this call to love and holiness in the concrete situations of our daily lives.

Why is all of this important as we progress through this season of Lent?

Simply put, it's almost a guarantee that at some point in this time we will find ourselves challenged by our Lord's guidance and desires, no matter how far along we are on that journey to freedom.

Sometimes, he may force the issue, and we may have to directly confront the ways in which our own heart, meant to be reserved as a temple of the Holy Spirit, has become cluttered with all sorts of things that don't belong there.

When the Lord breaks back into these parts of our lives, he may have to flip a few tables.

We should be ready for that!

But as hard as it can be to remember in the moment, when he calls us to conversion, and invites us to repentance, he does so to set us free.

And if it's not clear how exactly the trials we are experiencing are meant to lead us to freedom, then it's important that we trust him enough to be patient, and let him unfold the purpose of that plan in his own time.

This kind of faith is so important because the world will always offer us alternative ideas of freedom.

But, as Pope Saint John Paul II would write in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, we need to be on our guard to avoid, in his words, “every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world.”

Only Jesus Christ, he who is and who gives Truth itself in its fullness, can set us free.

When he calls us to conversion, when he invites us to conform our wills to his and to accept a new rule of life, with a law of love, rather than of servitude, we must offer him the faith and trust that he does want us to be free - free for an eternity of joy in the promised land of the new heaven that awaits his Body, the Church, a joy which we anticipate here in this liturgy.

The journey there will be challenging, but it will be worth it.

The sacrifices will be real, but small in comparison to the reward that awaits.

So the question you and I must answer is as simple as it is profound:

Do we want to be free?