

Homily
6OrdA
Feb. 16, 2020
St. Bernard Church
Dcn Tim Sullivan

FREEDOM AND OBEDIENCE

Today's readings raise the oldest and most troublesome issue that we humans have to deal with. It's the tension between freedom and obedience.

It is this tension between freedom and obedience that has brought us to a critical point in the history of the United States and the history of the Catholic Church.

The very first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, starts with this story of freedom and obedience.

Adam and Eve are given a certain amount of freedom by God. God tells Adam, "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden," but then God limits this freedom by telling Adam he is not free to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that eating from that tree shall bring death.

Eve is then created from Adam's rib. Everything is glorious at first, but then Satan shows up. And, of course, Satan tempts Adam and Eve by encouraging them to disregard God's instructions.

He tells them that if they eat the fruit of the tree, they will become like gods who know what is good and what is bad. They can decide on their own. They don't have to accept what God has told them.

This is the bottom line issue for every one of us, every day of our lives and every moment of every day. Who's in control? Is it us? Or is it God? Do we trust His wisdom? Or do we go our own way?

Today's readings make it crystal clear that God's laws, as revealed to us in the Bible and the established teachings of the Church, are non-negotiable. And they lead us to justice and to true freedom.

The First Reading, from the Book of Sirach, says: "If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live...Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him. Immense is the wisdom of the Lord..."

In the Second Reading, from the 1st Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul acknowledges that God's wisdom is often mysterious, but is given us by God for our glory. This means that we have to trust in God's wisdom even when there are times we don't quite understand it.

Finally, in today's Gospel from Matthew, Jesus Himself says whoever breaks the least of the commandments and teaches others to do so will be held to judgment. And He adds that obedience must come from the heart and not just from external behavior.

The most basic laws of God can be discerned by any human being who uses his or her reason to study the order of nature. As St. Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans:

Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.

He adds in Romans 2:15 that the laws of God "are written in the hearts" of the Gentiles by nature.

The laws of God and of nature form the basic principles on which the United States was founded.

Our Declaration of Independence states that its purpose is for the states to "assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them."

The most famous line of the Declaration is that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed **by their Creator** with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

It is clear that when God created humanity, and when the United States of America was formed, freedom was to be limited and restrained by natural law, by using reason to derive laws from the order of nature. God, and our founders, were both concerned that freedom, without the constraints of natural law, would lead to disorder, chaos and moral anarchy.

Here is a great quote from John Adams, who probably had the greatest influence of any one person on the principles on which the United States was founded:

“The happiness of the people was the purpose of government...and since all sober inquirers after truth agreed that happiness derived from virtue, that form of government **with virtue as its foundation** was more likely than any other to promote the general happiness.”

Adams believed that the whole purpose of democracy was to establish the conditions under which virtue would flourish.

Today, we are at a critical point in the history of the United States and in the history of the Catholic Church. Obviously, no one knows for sure what will happen, but it is very possible to make a strong argument that the American experience of democracy is in serious jeopardy.

Instead of promoting virtue, laws and judicial decisions have been passed down in our country in the last 50 years or so which legalize the most extreme departures from virtuous behavior.

And, in the Catholic Church, there is outspoken, widespread support for positions which are clearly contrary to the Bible and the long-established teachings of the Church. This has led to much confusion and even to concerns about a schism in the Church.

These are times which call for intense prayer, reflection and courage.

These are times when it's helpful to reflect on these words from today's First Reading:

“Immense is the wisdom of the Lord;
He is mighty in power, and all-seeing,
The eyes of God are on those who fear him;
He understands man's every deed
No one does he command to act unjustly,
To none does he give license to sin.”