

Thoughts from Fr. Michael Constraints & Freedom

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God!

America is the Home of the Brave and the Land of the Free. Yet, unlimited freedom leads to license and other antisocial activities. There is the understanding that as an American we should be able to do exactly as we please. This is a free country. But, is it really?

It is true that people in America enjoy a great deal of freedom compared to people in other parts of the world, and we delight in this knowledge. Yet, we are constrained by custom, etiquette, family expectations, traffic laws, and other social and criminal laws. We cannot do exactly as we please unless we expect to be arrested.

To truly enjoy freedom we must first submit to a constraint or two or maybe more. True freedom comes only after commitment to some rule, policy, religious tenet, set of laws, or person. A bachelor may play the field thinking he is free, but he really is constrained by the alibis he must conjure up to keep the field in play. Only by committing to one woman can he truly be free.

There was a famous round-about in Westchester County, New York: the Hawthorne Circle. A number of parkways converged in the town of Hawthorne into a round-about: the Saw Mill River Parkway, the Bronx River Parkway, the Taconic State Parkway, and the Sprain Parkway. When one came upon this circle one had to be alert to know the exit to take to continue on one's journey. If one was undecided as to which exit to take off the circle one went around it several times. Here was complete freedom: no decision making or thought required to continue around the circle. Yet, one never got anywhere; just traveling in circles. Until one made a commitment to take an exit and continue on one's way, there really was no freedom. Making the decision allows us to explore the road we chose and to enjoy the freedom of finding new destinations. Once a decision was made then there was freedom to travel to new places.

Many times in our lives we have experienced running in circles not knowing what to do next. We spin our wheels waiting for some sign or event to give us the energy to overcome our inertia and move forward. Until we commit we are doomed to staying in place. But to what should we commit?

What does all this discussion of commitment and freedom have to do with our spiritual journeys? In the month of January we celebrate two major events in the life of Christ; His circumcision on the eighth day of His earthly life (January 1st), and His baptism near His thirtyish birthday (January 6th). As our Lord and God and Savior He asked us to take up our crosses and follow Him. By following Him we are to follow His example. What lesson is He teaching us in these two actions?

He is teaching us to humble ourselves as He humbled Himself.

Christ tells us that He came not to destroy the law and the prophets, but rather to fulfill them. By entering into the Old Covenant God made with Abraham, all male children are to be circumcised

on the eighth day after birth. His earthly parents: Mary and Joseph helped him fulfill this law and to be a law abiding Jew. Christ created the covenant with Abraham, yet He lowered Himself to participate in the law for all faithful Jews. He was already pure, but He underwent this expectation to show His faithfulness to the Law.

His Baptism, on the other hand, He personally decided to do. When He approached his cousin, John the Baptist, The Baptist said You should be baptizing me. Jesus responded that it was fit and proper for Him to undergo this event. In other words, Jesus humbled Himself again to reach out to us. He underwent baptism so that when we are baptized we enter into the life in Christ.

St Paul reminds us that when we are baptized we are plunged into Christ's death, and when we are brought out of the baptismal font we are raised with Him in His Resurrection. We participate in Christ's saving grace. Further, Paul tells us in Romans Six when we are baptized in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit we put off the old man and put on the new man. In other words, we said goodbye to our old selves and greeted our new lives in Christ.

Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. Romans 6:3-4

We cannot serve both God and mammon; i.e., the world and its monetary values. By committing ourselves to Christ, we gain the freedom to live in Christ. Paul continues:

I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness... But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. Romans 6:19,22

Now, what is the best approach for eternal life: following worldly values that grow tattered and worn, or to follow the Son of God to the Kingdom of Heaven?

Just as Christ humbled Himself to circumcision and baptism, so are we to humble ourselves to follow Him, who is the epitome of humbleness and meekness.

What advantage is that? Well, the advantage is peace and reconciliation with God. But, it comes with a price. Following Christ takes courage and commitment as the journey will not be all peaches and cream. There will be struggles. There will be temptations. There will be challenges from worldly people and values. There will be hardships. And, there will be derision and scorn from those who reject godly ways and place their allegiance in other gods, philosophies, ideologies, or sciences. As Paul tells the Colossians "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the traditions of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ." [Col 2:8]

The world loves its own, but we as followers of Christ are not of the world. We know our home is somewhere else. We are merely sojourners here on earth awaiting our death and resurrection in Christ. How awesome to know we do have a heavenly destination!

As we begin a New Year let us take a moment to reflect on to whom and to what we commit. As human beings we are hard wired to commit to someone or something to keep us sane and to provide a framework in which we function. Should it be to worldly values, philosophies, and ideologies that bring heartache and stress, and where our freedom is curtailed by fear, anxiousness, and the continual search for meaning and peace? Or, do we commit to Christ where we find freedom to become the person God wants us to be. Following Christ will not be easy, but it will be rewarding and it will prepare us to deal with “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” with equanimity and joy.

Let us begin the New Year on a high note affirming or reaffirming our commitment to Christ, the only sinless One and the lover of mankind.

Happy New Year! May God grant us a healthy and joyous one.