

In the week preceding Holy Week the Gospels for weekday Mass come from the 8th chapter of the Gospel of John. The tension, hatred, bitterness, and rage of our Lord's enemies towards Him is almost palpable in this chapter. Our Lord's desire is that *everyone*, even those who hate Him, come to conversion and enter His Father's Kingdom. He also does not want His very vocal enemies misleading His disciples. So, He does not step back from these embittered, envious attacks. He meets their enraged, false (even absurd) accusations and claims with truthfulness. He does this in several ways. For one, He tries to bring light to the minds of His enemies by telling them of their sinfulness and the consequences of it; this is also intended to protect His disciples by telling them not to follow this example, regardless of what happens. He then also speaks of the good things that He has come to bring, one of which is the gift of freedom. What does that mean?

We have touched on the topic of freedom before, here and there, but not as a topic in its own right. It is worthwhile to do so by honing in our Lord's words: "if the Son of Man sets you free, then you are free." Pope St John Paul II made it clear that a mistaken notion of freedom is a cornerstone of modern problems and false beliefs, especially in the area of morality. So again, what is freedom?

The first question is: who gets to say? Whenever talking about something God created, then God alone gets to say. Just a few Sundays ago, in the first reading from Exodus, we heard God tell Moses that His name is: I Am Who Am. Let us remind ourselves what this name means? Well, suppose we posed this question to God: why is love this way and not another? You, God, say that love is sacrifice of self but I don't like that; why can't love mean: whatever I want that's what you want for me? And the Lord answers: I Am Who Am, the buck stops here and it simply can't be otherwise. Before any of creation existed – angels or material creation – I am all that existed. I am eternal. All of creation depends on Me, not vice versa. I am absolute reality and I can't be other than what I am. Now this applies to freedom as well. Human freedom is something created by God and He is the only one who can say what is and what it's for – not "Enlightenment philosophy," not popular opinion polls, not my own whim or fancy, not any other man-made contrivance. The true meaning and exercise of human freedom is something objective – it exists outside of me and independently of me, just like the sun does.

To define (or use) freedom in any way contrary to its true meaning is kicking the goad. What does that mean? Consider again a bodily analogy. Suppose a young person, who is still growing, falls down a steep, rocky cliff and suffers many broken bones. Somehow or other the person survives but they are never found so their bones heal in all kinds of distorted ways. They can't walk right, they can barely use their arms and hands, they're hunch-backed, and so on. But then the person is found and taken to a surgeon who fixes them up. The person feels good and enjoys being fixed up because...they are now how they are meant to be. Kicking the goad is like falling down that cliff. It distorts the soul and, no matter how good it tastes or feels initially, that distortion always leads to misery, just like a mangled body. Furthermore, if the soul is "fixed" and becomes like it is meant to be, the person will be like the one whose body was fixed: man, this is much better, I feel better, I can walk so much easier, I can use my hands and arms like they were meant to be used, this is great. Distortion of human freedom is a distortion of the soul, like the broken body of the one who fell down the cliff.

Human freedom, then, is something created by God, it is for the true and ultimate good of man, and misuse of freedom leads to a distortion of the soul, a separation from God.

So again, what is human freedom? Well it means pretty much what we ordinarily think – that there is no compulsion, nothing determining my thoughts, words, or deeds other than my own free choice. It's the absence of any necessity or force in regard to human action. Freedom can be both, or either, internal and/or external.

The bigger and more precise question is: what is it for, how is it to be used? The contemporary notion of freedom is that a person is allowed to do whatever they want, whatever tickles their fancy, and whenever they want. There should be no laws, according to this mistaken notion of freedom, no belief, no sentiment against, no impediment at all against anything I want. When people speak of freedom in our country today, this corruption of true freedom seems to be most often what is meant. This notion of freedom is kicking the goad, it is contrary to the way I Am Who Am is, it is contrary to the way we are meant to be, which leads to a distortion

of the human soul – like the broken-up body – and thus ultimately leads to pain, misery, and suffering. It cannot be, and will never be, any other way. It can't be changed because human freedom flows out of who I Am Who Am is, and corruptions of it lead to misery; it's as plain and simple as that, there is just no way around it. What is absolutely true just has to be accepted in order for a person to attain to true and lasting happiness. For your own good and the good of others: **Please don't kick the goad**, and teach others not to as well. It creates innumerable problems and much misery for man – individually and as a whole.

So how did God create human freedom to be used? What is it for? How is it to be exercised (used) in the way that is meant to be? The first thing to say to answer this question is that it might be a little helpful to distinguish between freedom and free will. The two are obviously very closely connected but they can be distinguished. Freedom is basically the capacity to exercise a truly free will. To see the distinction: man always has free will, he does not always have freedom. Consider external freedom, for example. During the French Revolution Mass was forbidden by the secular government and people could be put to death for celebrating or participating in Mass. They did not have external freedom, but they still had free will. They could choose to have and participate in clandestine Masses, and many did.

Thus, while freedom (both interior and exterior) is important in its own right, in order to answer the question of: what's the proper use of freedom – the one God created it for – it will be easier to take up the question of what is free will for, how is it to be used? So first: what is free will for, what is its purpose, how is it to be used? In order to make creatures that were capable of entering into a relation of love with Him, God had to give those creatures two things – two things that make us “capax Dei” = capable of God – namely: an intellect (or mind) and free will. The mind is what makes the will capable of being “free.” In order to have true free will we have to be able to know alternatives (the intellect) and then choose one (an act of the will). The purpose of free will, then, is very simply to choose the truly good, ultimately to choose to love God. Love is not first and foremost a feeling, as people often mistakenly think, it is first and foremost an act of the will. The purpose of the human mind and free will is to know (the intellect) and love (free will) God, and thus enter into a relation of *mutual* love with Him which leads to eternal bliss and fulfillment. That's it. Period. There's no big convolutions. It's as simple as that. Convolutions come from Satan, not God, and they have only one purpose: to corrupt.

Now we have two more things established: 1) human freedom is the capacity to exercise free will, and 2) the purpose of free will is to love, first and foremost to love God.

Let us return now to freedom: the capacity to exercise free will according to its true purpose. In particular, let us come to impediments to true freedom, starting with the distinction between interior freedom and exterior freedom. Unfortunately today when people speak of freedom they mean mostly, if not entirely, external freedom, that there are no laws or other external circumstances that impede what I want. The Lord says otherwise. For example, in last Wednesday's Gospel He said: whoever sins becomes a slave to sin. In other words, there can (and are) things in our own interior that impede the good and true use of free will. A person could have complete interior freedom but almost no exterior freedom. The example of St Maximillian Kolbe has been used before to illustrate this. In Auschwitz, Fr Kolbe had almost no exterior freedom, yet interiorly he was almost entirely, if not entirely, free. This is evidenced by his act of love in taking the man's place in the starvation chamber. If we remove impediments to interior freedom, then we will be interiorly free. In the space left, we can only very briefly touch on a few of these interior impediments to freedom.

One that we might not think of is incomplete knowledge or false belief. Remember that the intellect and free will have to operate together. If a person barely knows what God has revealed, if they are not studying the faith and coming to know God more and more, how can they possibly choose to love Him more and more? How can we choose to love Him if we don't know what that entails? Real knowledge, though, is not just information. It means that it's become a part of me. A person can have the information about what God has revealed but choose not to believe or accept it. False belief, then, is a big impediment to love of God. We will, at some point, have return to this topic of freedom. In the small space left, we can only mention one other major impediment to freedom: sin, the one our Lord brought out directly in the Gospel passage mentioned.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn