

32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time “What Freedom Looks Like”
Bishop Frank Schuster

The first reading we have from Maccabees is haunting. The reading begins, “It happened that seven brothers with their mother were arrested and tortured with whips and scourges by the king, to force them to eat pork in violation of God's law.” What is the background here? This is during a time in Israel’s history when they were conquered by the Greeks. Like many conquerors throughout history, the Greeks wanted to erase the culture they conquered by putting their own gods in the Temple and forcing the people under penalty of death to assimilate into their culture...in this instance, forcing the Jewish people to renounce their faith and practices such as abstaining from pork. And so, the issue here was not about pork. It was about religious freedom. Our first reading depicts the martyrdom of these brothers, one by one, in front of their mother. These men would rather die a cruel death at the hands of this earthly king than to renounce their faith in God. Their witness helped inspire the Maccabean uprising that liberated Israel. That is what is going on here. After their victory, the Jewish people carefully cleansed their Temple of foreign influence and rededicated it. The Jewish feast day of Hanukah is a remembrance of this time.

There are many reasons why this reading is so jarring; however, for me what makes this first reading from Maccabees so haunting is as follows. As much as we would like to relegate the king’s cruelty in this story to history, as if this kind of thing couldn’t happen today, we know this kind of thing still happens today and happens too often. There are still places in the world where Christians are being dragged out of their homes every day, places where converting to Christianity is a capital crime punishable by imprisonment or even death, places where a young adult could come home and tell his or her parents that he or she is a Christian now, and the parents would say, “Are you nuts? You just put our whole family in danger”. And so, we know that martyrdom for the faith still happens today. The witness of the martyrs moves us to ask questions like, “What do we really think is most important in life”, and “What is our faith made of”?

It is good to be reminded at times that the Catholic Church is built on the witness of the martyrs. The word martyr comes from the Greek word that literally means “witness”, and so what are the martyrs giving witness to? They are giving witness to something more important than life itself. How is that possible? Bishop Robert Barron once made the compelling argument once that what all dictators and tyrants have in common is that they force people to do their will by either threatening or forcibly taking away earthly comforts one at a time, up to even taking away limbs and life. That is how a tyrant operates. What do the thousands of martyrs from Jewish times, Roman times, and modern times (today) have in common? They value a right relationship with God as being more important than anything this life has to offer. Think about that. Because of this, nothing in this world has power over them because they value God over anything a tyrant can give or take away. Because of this, they are truly free in a way most people aren’t.

The Sadducees in our Gospel reading were the temple priests in Jesus' day, and they had a lot of power over the people. They were different than the Pharisees in that the Sadducees only held to the Torah and no other book. As such, they did not believe in the resurrection and liked to make fun of people who did, as we see in our Gospel reading. Since the Sadducees oversaw the Temple, a preacher like Jesus who challenged their belief system was seen as a threat. Jesus, however, is the Son of God, and so he knows God's eternal vocation for us. He came from heaven, he is going back to heaven, and he wants to bring us with him someday. Because Jesus knows the Father's will in heaven, the Sadducees have no power over him. Jesus is free, even in the face of persecution. And, we can be free like this too, if we truly allow ourselves to belong completely to Jesus as his disciples. We all know this is not as easy as it sounds.

And so, I think the invitation this weekend is for us is to consider: what is the most important thing we value in this life, is it God or is something else? If it is something else, we are lot less free than we might think. The scriptures are also asking us to consider: what is causing us the greatest amount of anxiety or fear in our lives right now? What worries us the most, is it something that is going on in our family or work right now? Is it something going on in our country or world right now? What is causing us the most anxiety or fear in your life at present? Now, can we take a lesson or two from the martyrs and put our unconditional trust in the Lord, come what may? Can we value our relationship with God more than whatever this world can give or take away? My friends, once we learn how to do this, no tyrant or fear or worry can ever enslave us, claim power over us or cause us undue anxiety. If we follow St. Paul's advice in our second reading today, and let the Lord direct our hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ, everything will work out in the end, it will, and we will truly know freedom, perhaps for the very first time, through Christ our Lord. Amen.