

Slaves of whom?

Homily for October 21, 2021

One of the most important documents from Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (the Joys and the Hopes) articulated what it means to live as people of faith in the modern world. It was written with a deep and honest appraisal of the challenges and opportunities faced as contemporary people who choose to follow in the way of Jesus. In the 18th section of *Gaudium et Spes* are these words:

We rebel against death because we bear in ourselves an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. All the endeavors of technology, though useful in the extreme, cannot calm our anxiety; for prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy that desire for higher life which is inescapably lodged in the human breast.¹

It is this struggle between a lower and higher life that the Apostle Paul is considering in our reading from Romans. However it is because there are so many for whom that possibility of this higher life is unfathomable that Jesus says in families there will be one member pitted against another. For while it is true that we rebel against death, how we live out that rebellion can take us farther from God, because the conclusion is made that all the suffering negates evidence for God's loving care of us. Conversely, the data of the world can draw us ever closer to Jesus and his love.

The tension that we see played out in our families is a tension that has as its central question, "Who will be our master? Sin or Jesus?"

Slavery. It's not a word we like to hear. It brings to mind some of the worst abuses of humanity, and it violates the matchless dignity of every person. Is St. Paul saying it's okay? Of course not!

Unfortunately, the Romans Paul was writing to saw slavery as a fact of life. In the first century, as many as one in three people in the city of Rome was a slave! So Paul says he is speaking "in human terms" (Romans 6:19). Using a concept they could relate to, he talks about being "slaves of sin" (6:20). They understood being held in bondage by a power greater than their own. They had vivid images of people being compelled to obey even if they didn't want to. And so Paul used slavery as a way of explaining the power of sin.

Being "slaves of God" is an even harder image to understand. Paul is expressing the wholehearted, freely chosen obedience that God wants every one of his children to demonstrate. Just as slaves have only one master, so we believers should love and follow God alone, not "enslaving" ourselves to sin or to anything else. We know that God loves our free will and wants us to choose to obey him out of love, not out of fear of punishment.

¹ Catholic Church. (2011). [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium Et Spes](#). In *Vatican II Documents*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Paul is trying to help the Romans understand the difference between being bound by our sinful tendencies and being children of God wholly belonging to him.

In a sense, Paul is redefining the word when he talks about our call to become “slaves” to a God who loves us and has redeemed us. He also redefines the word “master” when he tells us that God is a Master who wants to set us free!

In the end, it’s a beautiful paradox: we find our greatest freedom when we surrender ourselves to God. The more we submit to his reign, the freer we become. May we never go back to living as a “slave” to sin!²

And it is as we live as those who are free in Christ in a life of trusting surrender that we realize that higher life that incorporates our biological life but is more than the mere extension our physical existence.

It is this life Paul has in mind when at the end of today’s reading he says: “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”. It is this eternal life Gaudium et Spes goes on to describe:

the Church has been taught by divine revelation and firmly teaches that man has been created by God for a blissful purpose beyond the reach of earthly misery³

May we be renewed today in our love for God and choosing him as our master, while we loving and prayerfully pray for those in our family who are either indifferent, or hostile to Jesus and his Gospel of freedom.

² <https://wau.org/meditations/2020/>

³ Catholic Church. (2011). [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium Et Spes](#). In *Vatican II Documents*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.