

Christ Respects Our Freedom

By Fr. Gehler, St. Anthony

Have you ever been to an event where there are thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of people and they are all hanging on the words, actions, or music of the people up on stage? That is what it was like for Christ, his words have power. Immense crowds press upon him as he teaches. The crowd was so big, Jesus actually got into a fishing boat and used the lake as his speaking platform, so that he could address everyone gathered on the shore. Crowds like this hung on his every word wherever he went. He could easily have turned them into a revolutionary army and manipulated them for any number of purposes.

But instead, he simply invites them to change their hearts.

Jesus truly is the Lord, but he refuses to bully us into following him. He is the "sower" of the parable, spreading God's Word and announcing God's invitation, but never forcing our hearts to welcome it. This combination of eagerness to win over disciples, but respect for his listeners' freedom is especially evident in Jesus' use of parables. A parable is a simple comparison between a hard-to-understand divine truth, a truth about God and his plan of salvation, and a well-known earthly reality. Some interpreters say that Jesus used these stories and comparisons to conceal his meaning from his opponents. But there is also another way to look at it.

Sometimes we don't want to accept the plain truth, because it means we have to change. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the plain truth. But many didn't accept it. So now he takes a more roundabout way to convince them. The parables offer his listeners a chance to accept certain truths in the abstract, before seeing how they apply to them personally.

We truly are free to choose to follow Christ or not follow Christ, but outside factors influence that freedom, trying to get us to choose a self-centered life over a Christ-centered life.

The first influence is the devil, represented by the birds that eat the seed of the path. The devil is real. He and his army of fallen angels hate God and God's followers. They influenced our first parents, Adam and Eve, successfully tempting them to disobey God's commandments, thereby breaking off their friendship with God. The devil wants to do the same thing to us. So, he is always planting half-truths in our minds: God won't mind if you have a little fun; God won't be able to forgive that sin; you don't really need the sacraments, you can just go to God directly, all by yourself...He uses subtle deceptions to uproot our friendship with God.

The second influence is our own tendency to laziness and comfort, what St Paul calls "the flesh." This is represented by the rocky soil. Many times, God's will demand self-sacrifice - we have to carry crosses, just as Jesus did, if we want to be faithful to our life's purpose. Our ingrained love for comfort resists self-sacrifice. The third influence is the culture around us, which is a product of fallen human nature. This is represented by the thorns. This fallen world promises perfect happiness in money, achievements, popularity, or passing pleasures. That's a false promise, because God alone satisfies the human heart.

When we follow God's will and stay true to our friendship with Christ even in the face of these contrary influences, then our lives bear the abundant fruit of wisdom, compassion, and lasting happiness.

God knows better than we do the subtlety of the devil's deceptions, the force of our selfish tendencies, the allure of the world's treasures and pleasures. And so, God, because he loves us with a perfect Father's love, has provided helps for our freedom. He has given us the sacrament of confession, which is a healing sacrament as well as a sacrament of forgiveness.

Whenever we give in to our selfish tendencies and sin, we damage our freedom, we put chains around it. The sacrament of confession breaks those chains and strengthens us against future temptations. He has given us the sacrament of the Eucharist. Holy Communion is not just a symbol of the Last Supper. It is our reception of Christ's own body and blood, of Christ's very own strength. It bolsters everything that is good in us, strengthening us against all that is evil. He has also given us the Church's guaranteed teaching authority, the Magisterium.

Finally, Jesus has given us the incredible gift of prayer. Whenever we feel our freedom under attack, we can pray. We have non-stop direct access to the all-powerful God, who will never fail to come to our aid. The sacraments, Church teaching, and prayer - these are our front-line defenses against the devil, the flesh, and the world.

Today, as Jesus renews his commitment to us in this Mass, let's thank him for these gifts, and promise that we will use them well.