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This particular elderly priest was probably the world's worse golfer. One day he made an almighty drive and the golf ball was going straight towards the pin. It kept rolling as if drawn by a magnet and continued to roll, hit the pin bang on and dropped straight into the hole. The astounded priest turned his eyes towards heaven. "Lord", he begged, "I'd rather do it myself".

Human freedom is emphasised in today's First Reading: "Man has life and death before him, whichever a man likes better will be given him". He's not talking here about physical death over which we have no control but spiritual death. Spiritual death is more often than not a slow lingering process. *It is said that if you drop a frog into a bucket of boiling water, he'll spring back out at lightning speed but if he's put in a pot where the water is gradually heated he'll stay in it to the very end and be scolded to death.* Spiritual death is a bit like that - it can creep up on us unawares through a progressive misuse of our freedom.

If God took away our freedom we'd no longer be human and living good virtuous lives would be out of the question. We would end up being spiritual robots.

The century just gone had its share of notorious dictators. Why did God allow evil tyrants to live, bringing death to millions? It's all to do with human freedom – one of the most sublime gifts which God has given us.

Man by misusing his freedom is capable of the basest deeds but by using it in line with God's will he can reach the heights of virtue. Freedom is not doing what you like but doing what God likes and from the heart. Jesus tells us in today's gospel that the sin of lust, for instance, can take hold of a man's heart and mind and curb his freedom. He can't say 'no' or control himself anymore. Jesus says that anyone who commits sin is a slave. The Devil wants to bind us but Jesus wants to unbind us and give us back our freedom.

But freedom is not about obeying external rules. That can be another form of slavery. Jesus says in today gospel "if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the Pharisees you won't get into heaven". For them keeping external rules was the priority. Freedom to love as Jesus loves comes from the inner man or woman the very place where real freedom resides.

I was reading on the paper not too long ago where a man from Pakistan was arrested for converting from Islam to Christianity. Some of the Muslim clerics told him he'll be executed within days if he doesn't reconvert. But he loves Jesus so much that he stood his ground and vehemently refused to change his mind. That's freedom. Even threatening him with death did not sway him.

Free will is a beautiful gift which if used responsibly will earn us the reward of everlasting life. At the last Judgement we will be judged on how we've used or abused it. As always the choice is ours.