

6A

This particular elderly priest was probably the world's worse golfer. One day he made a mighty 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 highlighted 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 ultimately no control but spiritual death. Spiritual death is more often than not a slow lingering process. *I'm told 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 slowly heated he'll stay in it to the very end and be scolded to death.* Spiritual death is a bit like that - it brings us down little by little through a gradual misuse of our freedom. Our sins slowly catch up with us.

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 – God's gift to man. The angels who rebelled against God in Heaven did so freely and they became demons. Adam and Eve freely gave into the serpent and they were driven from Paradise.

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 eclipse his freedom. He can't say 'no' or control himself. Jesus says that anyone who commits sin is a slave. The Devil wants to bind us in sin, but Jesus wants to unbind us and give us back our liberty. Modern day

slavery is on the rise but it's controlled by the powers of darkness. But even political correctness can make us unfree. Of course we are never free to voice our prejudices but what if political correctness is gagging us regarding the truth of a particular situation. The gospel would demand us not to be silent.

But freedom is not merely about obeying external rules. That can be another form of slavery. Jesus says in today's 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 but their hearts were hard. They cleaned the outside of the cup, as Jesus said, but inside was another story. Freedom to love as Jesus loves comes from the inner man or woman the very place where real freedom resides.

Free will is a beautiful gift which if used responsibly will prove our worth as Christians and earn us the reward of everlasting life. At the last Judgement we will be judged on how we've used or abused it. The choice is ours.