

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER 10th May 2015 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-12; John 15:9-17

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

Brian Clark’s play “Whose Life Is It Anyway?” was later made into a film starring Richard Dreyfuss as a sculptor who becomes a quadriplegic after a car accident and sues for the right to end his life. He can no longer create art, make love or have any semblance of a normal existence. He hires a lawyer who, after some initial reluctance, agrees to represent him. He is met with fierce opposition by the hospital administrator who’s determined to keep his patient alive even if it’s against his wishes. A sympathetic doctor develops personal feelings for the sculptor and wants to keep him alive. Growing tired of others trying to control and direct what life he has left, he cries out in anger, “Whose life is it anyway?”

That’s a good question to ponder. It’s also a question that in our world today seems to have an obvious answer. Our lives are our lives. Who else has the right to decide how we live our lives? This is *my* life. Freedom of choice is paramount.

In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is speaking to a group which includes both Jews and gentiles. That was unheard of. While he was speaking the Holy Spirit fell on these gentiles. The Jewish believers were “astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). Then we read Peter’s response: ““Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”” (10:47). Note those two words – “gift” and “received.” Jesus said, “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

Two worldviews if you like: My life is my life. Therefore my death is my death as well. In making moral decisions the important thing is that *I* have *chosen*. On the other hand life as a gift; something given, something received.

The Federal treasurer famously said, “The age of entitlement is over. It has to be replaced . . . with an age of opportunity” (Federal budget speech, May 13, 2014). An earlier speech was delivered to the Institute of Economic Affairs in April 17 2012 in which the treasurer said: “Thankfully the modern capitalist economy is centred around (*sic*) the satisfaction of personal wants and needs. Commercial transactions are at the core of the system.”

This way of viewing the world started with the Enlightenment. Adam Smith was a Scottish moral philosopher and key Scottish Enlightenment figure. He was called the “father of modern economics” who laid the foundations of the classical free market economic theory. His book *The Wealth of Nations* was named among the best 100 Scottish books of all time and it is said that the late UK PM Margaret Thatcher used to carry a copy in her handbag.

Her famous saying, “There’s no such thing as society” was the epitome of the view that we are all individuals. One of primary goals of the Enlightenment was the formation of individuals: one who is answerable to no-one but the sovereign self. I am answerable to no story but the one I have personally chosen. My life is not determined by tradition, family, tribe or community, but by me.

It's deeply ingrained in our way of thinking and virtually unquestioned. Yet our loud assertions of our freedom of choice blind us to the ways we've become captive to other forms of enslavement. We devote massive resources to weapons of destruction, security systems, technological gadgets and machines, numerous forms of chemical addiction, even health and fitness when it becomes compulsive and focused on appearance.

We've exchanged one form of tyranny for another but always promoted as freedom. The Bishop of Rome has said we need to say 'No' to a financial system which rules rather than serves. He says just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is intended to safeguard the value of human life, today we need to apply that to an economy that kills by exclusion and inequality. He says, "Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, p. 47). Under the guise of freedom the marketplace has become the new absolute ruler.

Our lives become shrunken because as the Pope says our needs are reduced to one: consumption (*ibid.* p.49). "The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule" (*ibid.*, pp. 49-50).

Freedom has become a negative freedom from instead of freedom to. Paul Tillich spoke of the cultural disenchantment of his own post war era: "They try to undermine every norm put before them . . . They courageously reject any solution which would deprive them of their freedom of rejecting whatever they want to reject." "Much compulsive self-affirmation, and much fanatical self-surrender are expressions of the noncreative courage to be as oneself" (quoted in Peter Gomes, *The Good Life*, p.185). Freedom from.

Along with this emphasis on freedom there's a corresponding insecurity and feeling of vulnerability. We're seeing more acts of senseless aggression and hostile behaviour. PM Tony Abbott said last September that the balance between security and freedom "may have to shift." "Regrettably, for some time to come, Australians will have to endure more security than we're used to, and more inconvenience than we would like." "There may be more restrictions on some, so that there can be more protection for others."

There was a time when people got their stories from their parents, or the church, or the town where they grew up. But the touting of freedom of choice seduces us into thinking that if I haven't chosen my own story I'm not an authentic human being. I'm a construct of someone else. Yet this detachment from my past or my family or tradition is itself a story. We get to make it up as we go.

The truth is we are never completely detached from other influences. Unless we choose to live on a desert island away from all influences and away from other people, we'll always make our decisions at least to some extent based on what we've learned from others.

We have cut ourselves off from wisdom and have become enslaved to other tyrants. The fact is the alternatives are themselves stories and very narrow ones at that. Loneliness and alienation are big problems in the modern world. Having been freed from the ties that bind we've all become strangers. My own subjectivity has become a new enslavement.

Jesus' image of vine and branches is one of intimacy, abiding, remaining closely attached in order to bear fruit. It's not based on transactions or self-sufficiency but on deep abiding love and of selfless giving because we recognise life and all we have as a gift.

Jesus reminds us today that discipleship, being a Christian is not our idea, not our choice. "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit." Bearing fruit is radically different from our society's emphasis on consumption. Plants like vines give life. They receive nutrients in order to bear fruit. Jesus says we are to abide in the vine not simply to consume but to bear fruit.

Knowing that Christ has chosen us is actually a great relief and comfort in our world of false freedoms. I don't always look, feel or act like a Christian. But thank God it's not up to me. The way I appear or feel or act are not the final deciding factor in my standing with God. Any fruit I bear is because I'm attached to the vine. We can easily think that the spiritual life is a series of shoulds, oughts and musts. If I don't get it right I'm sunk.

On this Mothers' Day, we can thank God for the reminder that we are not here through our own efforts. We're here through the gifts of others – those who showed us the way, like our mothers. Others we may never have even met but they've influenced us through their writings or we marvel at the record of their lives.

We have been embraced by this story from outside our limited experiences. We've been saved, rescued from our own subjectivity and our enslavement to false gods by Jesus the true vine. Our lives are broadened and deepened and made larger and more expansive and more free because we're abiding in the vine.

We come today to receive again the source of our nourishment, the body and blood of Christ. We come, not to gorge ourselves as consumers but as those who need the life he gives and has chosen to transform the world through us.

Fr Mark Watson