

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." (Lev. 25.10)

It is most appropriate that this verse from Leviticus should be inscribed on the Liberty Bell, for as the Lord says in the Gospel of John, it is His Word that makes people free. He did not just say "the truth shall make you free," but "If you abide in My Word....you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8.31-32)

Because the Lord created us to be free, the desire for freedom is built into human nature. The very word "human" implies "free." The two faculties which make us human are liberty and rationality.

This is why freedom is a right. That word, "right," is used very loosely today; people say they have a right to all kinds of things -- education, a job, medical care -- but the right to be free is an essential and absolute right because it stems from what we actually are, by design, by Divine decree.

This is why in the Declaration of Independence that right is said to be "unalienable," a right with which people are "endowed by their Creator." It is not a right granted by any government or human agency, but comes from God.

Similarly, the Constitution of the United States is not a document delineating rights granted to the people by the government; just the opposite. It describes the powers granted to the government by the people, and places strict limits on those powers, lest the government infringe upon the people's freedom.

These documents -- the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution -- out of which the American form of government grew and upon which it rests, are echoes of that ancient Levitical proclamation of liberty.

In the teachings of the New Church, liberty and rationality are inseparably linked. We have been given liberty because our conjunction, by love, with the Lord must be reciprocal; love can only be given and accepted freely. And we have been given rationality for the sake of liberty.

What would it mean to be free without understanding?

The Writings give us new and quite profound definitions of "rationality" and "liberty." Rationality is defined as the ability to understand what is good and true. (DLW 240) It is not cold logic, or the use of reason apart from love and religious faith, but involves the ability to grasp spiritual principles and apply them to natural life. It is "the capacity to receive spiritual light." (DLW 247) So it is closely linked to "conscience." A person with no conscience might be able to reason very cleverly, but would not be "rational" as that word is used in the Writings.

A very similar concept of rationality prevailed with the founders of the United States. They prized reason, and were suspicious of the dogma and superstition of the established churches, but it is clear from many of their statements that Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin and others of the founders did not conceive of reason as an intellectual activity apart from acknowledgment of God and His Word. Quite to the contrary, in their view virtue and religious sensibility were seen as essential elements of the rational.

"Liberty" is defined in the Writings as the ability to do -- not whatever you happen to feel like doing at the moment -- but to do what is true and good. (DLW 240)

And again, the ideal of liberty that prevailed with the authors of the American form of government was similar. The civil liberty they sought to establish was not just for the material comfort and pleasure of the people, but so they might be free to better themselves spiritually and become more truly human.

Whether you say freedom can only exist together with rationality, or together with order, it is the same thing. The use of reason is to discern

what is orderly -- in the highest sense, what agrees with the order of heaven -- and bring that order down into our lives.

Genuine order flows from spiritual love. The true order of human life does not come by external compulsion, but grows naturally in a society when the loves of the people are governed by the Word.

When there is no order from within, from people freely and rationally governing their own lives and restraining their baser appetites and impulses, then hell breaks loose, and for the sake of its survival society is driven to put in place an order imposed externally, by force.

The point is: license is not liberty; license destroys liberty. We must learn to distinguish between the two. Freedom without responsibility cannot endure. It is not enough to claim our rights, we must exercise the responsibility which makes those rights possible. "If you abide in My Word....you shall be free." (John 8.32)

Responsibility means responsibility to God and our fellow human beings. Love of the Lord and love of the neighbor -- those two great commandments of the Lord's Word -- define the essence of our responsibility, and our keeping of them is the key to retaining the rights we prize so highly.

It all begins with shunning evils as sins. This is the first use of reason: to receive the light of truth, and in that light to discern the evils within ourselves for the purpose of constraining and removing them. And this is the first use of freedom: to compel ourselves to follow the truth instead of our own natural desires.

This familiar New Church teaching that we have a personal responsibility to shun evils as sins makes this religion ideally suited for a free society -- as do the doctrines concerning usefulness, charity, liberty and rationality, and others.

Genuine liberty can only exist with genuine rationality -- that is, where there is an understanding of spiritual truth, and an acceptance of those principles and virtues which define the order of heaven. In other

words, genuine liberty cannot exist apart from the acknowledgment of God, and a willingness to live by His Word.

This is true of an individual's liberty, and of the civil liberty of a nation. The founders of the United States were very clear about the fact that the kind of government they were establishing assumed a virtuous citizenry. They were quite explicit about this. Government by the people would only work if the people were a virtuous people.

Because they were aware of how corrupt human nature is, it is possible to detect a note of skepticism in their writings that the government they were establishing would endure. On the other hand, because they trusted in providence, they were hopeful, too.

The very word "virtue" has an old-fashioned ring to it these days. We're more comfortable talking about "values" now -- a much more malleable, less demanding concept. To our sophisticated ears, the very names of the traditional human virtues sound quaint, if not downright corny. Piety. Humility. Courage. Chastity. Honesty. Patriotism. Patience. Industry. Thrift. Self-reliance, and also a willingness to cooperate with others for the benefit of the whole community.

But if we would remain free, such virtues are essential.

Heavenly ideals are not brought down to earth easily, or without conflict. Their implementation will not be perfect, because human beings are not perfect and this world is not perfect.

With this in mind, the crack in the Liberty Bell seems only to make it an even better symbol of American liberty.

America is a work in progress. It always has been and always will be. Its great ideals may be only imperfectly realized, but the country's striving to realize them more perfectly never stops.

May it be so with each of us. Who among us can say we fully live up to the ideals we profess? Yet we must keep trying.

And in this far-from-perfect world, the American experiment in free government still shines as a beacon to the world.

It is a common saying that "peace begins with me." Or "charity begins with me." It is the same with freedom. We have a responsibility to examine ourselves and strive to be worthy of the civil liberty we enjoy.

The Lord said we should not hide our light under a bushel, but let it shine so others can see it. This is true of the light of freedom, also. And the sound of freedom. If we value it, and understand the nature of it, and work to make ourselves worthy of exercising it, then the Lord's command will be obeyed, and the joyful sound of freedom will ring ever louder throughout all the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.