

A bagpiper was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Nova Scotia back country. The bagpiper was not familiar with the backwoods and got lost and didn't stop for directions. He finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch. The bagpiper felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. He went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. He didn't know what else to do, so he started to play. The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. He played out his heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. He played like never before for this homeless man. And as he played "Amazing Grace", the workers all began to weep. They wept; the bagpiper wept. When he finished, he packed up his bagpipes and started heading for the car. His head was hung low, his heart was full. As he opened the door to the car, he heard one of the workers say: "I never seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."

The point is in life, it can be easy to lose our way. We're not trying to find our way to a grave, but rather to the heavenly kingdom. And helping us so much in this is the directions God gives us; namely His law. But it takes work to follow.

In real life, a story of two people who took different paths is that of Henry VIII and Saint Thomas More. Both were Catholic; but one grew closer to God; the other moved farther away.

It would seem that Sir More would be the most unlikely of martyrs. He has a great family, money, and is well respected as a successful writer. He rises up the ladder in English society, is educated in Latin and Greek and becomes a lawyer.

It was right after he became a lawyer that he thought of entering a monastery, and would join in the spiritual exercises of the Carthusian monks, who greatly influenced him. Eventually he decides to remain in secular life, and marries Jane Colt with whom he has four children before she dies in 1511, and then marries a widow, Alice Middleton.

Though busy as a lawyer, he was considered a loving father; he'd often write his kids while away. He also insisted that his daughters get the same education as his son.

He gets elected to Parliament and represents London; he's known as an honest and effective politician. In his spare time he'd study his faith and write, his most famous work "Utopia" about a fictional, idealistic island society.

With his writing, his law practice and service in Parliament he becomes known to the king, Henry VIII. He and the king become friends; he's knighted and made Under-Treasurer, and then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, giving him authority over northern England on behalf of the king, and then Lord Chancellor. The Reformation breaks out, where you have different groups breaking off from the Church. Mostly it is for disagreements on Church teaching, and initially More and the king are strongly allied. Together they even write a book called "In Defense of the Seven Sacraments," which targets Luther's view that there were just three valid sacraments. More was passionate about the faith he loved so much.

But things quickly go downhill. Henry VIII wants to divorce his wife, Catherine, and seeks an annulment; More refuses to sign. It was the first time he drew the ire of the king.

Henry doesn't take "no" for an answer. He divorces his wife, Catherine, and breaks from the Catholic Church.

More by this point is on the outs with Henry. His conscience tells him he can't support Henry VIII anymore, who had lost his way as a Catholic. He also knew continuing to support the king meant supporting a schism against the Church. More offers his resignation, citing failing health, and Henry reluctantly accepts it.

Things get worse when More refuses to attend the coronation of Anne Boylen, who was now Queen of England. Instead a letter of congratulations is written, but the letter, as opposed to actually being present, was deeply offensive to the king; he viewed it as an insult to the queen and undermining his authority as head of state.

Thomas could have kept his power and his position if he signed a document (The Act of Supremacy) with other nobles and even church leaders who say that the king is who should run the church in England. And most everyone does, including priests and bishops. But Thomas refuses. He doesn't go out of his way to make trouble, and tries to stay silent. But when he doesn't show up at the coronation, people start talking. Even though he did not deny her right to become queen, he gets locked away in the tower of London as the king is embarrassed. Just over a year later, he gets tried in a kangaroo court, and is sentenced to die. But even before this, he can save his life if he'll just sign the document. Again though, he refuses because he says no temporary ruler on earth can say they, rather than the pope, should be the one to determine doctrine. And so he dies, with his final words being "I die the kings servant, but God's first."

Before he died, in his 14 months locked up in the Tower of London, he continued his writing and he wrote a lot about conscience. In letter after letter, he wrote how when we follow our conscience that we find an "inward gladness...to the virtuous mind" and that acts of conscience gives an "intimate glimpse" of the soul. While he certainly saw his conscience as individual, more than that he saw it as something communal. By that, More

wasn't the kind of guy to create his own moral values, which is what society so often tells us to do – what's right for you might not be right for me and vice versa. That might be true when we are talking about ice cream flavors or sports team preferences, but not when we are talking about what will get us to heaven. For More, forming the conscience was part of a long process where one found a preexisting moral order – God's law. And that's where More and Henry parted ways. Henry wanted to substitute his own law for the "higher law of God and Christ's Church." For Henry, and indeed for so many people in the world then and now, the individual conscience is what reigns supreme over every other authority. For More, the Church's law and God's law were more important than that of a man, and refusing to go along with everyone else was not More trying to make the king look bad or an attempt to break a civil law, but rather an act of obedience to truth.

So, how about for us? No doubt for years Henry VIII went to Mass and appeared to be firm in his Catholic faith. But as Jesus says to the Pharisees: "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile." Did he go overnight from being a friend of Thomas More to

someone who ignored God's law and also became egocentric and a cruel, self-absorbed man? Rather like for all of us, both men followed a gradual path - one deepening his relationship with God, the other deepening his distance from God.

Front and center is the law in our readings today. We hear in Deuteronomy: "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe...Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations." The law is a gift from God.

Sometimes we see the law as a barrier to our freedom. And it is true in civil society, there are unjust and sometimes even immoral laws. But the law from God is given to us so we can reach our potential. Think of the rules growing up; our parents have us do some chores or do our homework or limit our video game time or tell us that we need to avoid some things and embrace others because they want to help us reach our potential, not diminish us. And when we get older, we find that our hobbies and interests have rules too. Sure we can do what we want to an extent, but are we truly free when we do that? Not so much. Much like the younger son in the prodigal son parable who goes off away from the father, he ends up empty. So it is for the person who does not do God's will or follow His law.

How we follow God's law is by doing a regular examination of conscience. We ask ourselves how are we doing with respect to loving God and others. As I shared yesterday at daily Mass, consider going through the 7 deadly sins and see where they are at. As a reminder, there's pride; where we can think we are better than others or always know best, or that our gifts are superior to others. Do we listen to others and ask for help and advice? Do we respect the other people in our family? Do we admit when we need to make changes? Am I selfish? There's wrath or anger; do we harbor resentment or gossip or tear people down? There's sloth; are we overly lazy or not do our fair share at work or school or home? There's envy where we get preoccupied with others gifts and become resentful. There's greed where we can forget the blessings we have and want to just get more possessions or stuff. And there's gluttony, not meaning just a preoccupation with food but doing things to excess. And there's lust, where we objectify the body. Everyone has temptations and thoughts, but we also need to ask ourselves if we are looking at a person's body and soul or just body. All of these things get to violating love of God and neighbor because our hearts become divided. We want to rejoice at the things we do well, but at the same time be attentive to where the divisions are and where we aren't following God's law as we should, because we don't want to just be

“pretty good” but we want to become saints which means following all of the law.

Doing that examination of conscience, we can then look at our actions.

What do they say about where our heart is? Saint James says that faith without works is dead. We look at how we treat others around us. We look at maybe how we are failing or where we are succeeding and learn from this and try to keep it up. To return to Henry VIII and Sir More, by not going to the wedding, but not signing his name when he knew an annulment was wrong in that situation, his actions spoke to where his heart is, just as when Henry VIII moved ahead and did whatever he wanted.

Most all of us have a struggle with one area of the law or the other. And maybe early on in our spiritual journey, we follow laws because we don't want to “offend” God much like a child at first doesn't want to get in trouble from mom or dad. But unless they are in some abusive environment, the child learns that they aren't following the laws so as not to get in trouble, but because mom and dad love them and they in turn love their parents, and then down the road see the wisdom of their parents. Our parents, however, are human and make some mistakes. Not so with God though.

Rather, God wants to set us free; such is the holiness of the saints who grow in grace and learn from their struggles. The paradox of Sir More is that at the end of his life, dying a political prisoner from a corrupted king, he was the one who was in fact the most free; Henry VIII the one who was imprisoned by his sins for he made up his own law rather than following Gods.

One last note: we also want to avoid being the modern day Pharisee who is an expert in the law, but doesn't internalize it. Sometimes a person knows all of the commandments, they know what the catechism says, or maybe they are an expert on the liturgy and they go to Mass all the time and pray all the time, but the law doesn't take root. They are quick to judge others but right after Mass are going back to those deadly sins and back to gossiping, to giving into lust, or may have even become blind to their shortcomings. Again, we all fall - often many times. God's grace is there. But it requires the response. We want to make the law something that is close to our heart, and then use it to help others not to judge or hinder them, but to truly help them reach their potential.

One of my favorite scenes in “A Man for All Seasons” is when Thomas More is talking to Richard Rich, not to be confused with the young wealthy boy in the comics, but the man who gets the power Thomas More once had. In conversing with him, More says “Why Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world. But for Wales?” He looks with sadness on his protege for, like his old boss, losing his way. As More found out, following the law was quite costly. It can be so for us too, for often the law is counter cultural, whether it’s peer pressure as a teenager or from coworkers or society as an adult to get with the times or do as others do. It’s neither easy to speak the truth, or to live the truth once we know the truth. And what a tragedy that so many people like Rich, like Henry, don’t see the way to true freedom. Momentarily we’ll come forth to receive Holy Communion, and in doing so again be reminded of how much we are loved. But as we receive our Lord, let’s also think about what following him means, coming to know Him more deeply along with the law that God has given us, so we can truly grow in grace and experience the true freedom knowing how to follow Him to receive the crown of life in the Kingdom of Heaven.