

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – September 4, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 875 words

The Lord Jesus speaks to us in this Sunday's gospel using rather dramatic rhetoric, in order to drive home both the cost of discipleship and how to be a prudent disciple. This gospel invites us to evaluate our lives in a sober and serious manner so that we can be successful in following the Lord.

He first speaks of what is needed to construct a tower successfully, in order to help us understand what are the necessary preparations and calculations to be a faithful disciple, lest our own life should end in embarrassment and disgrace. Think about how someone who is ambitious can climb his way to the top... and then end up being a total failure, because he didn't have what it took to be what he had become. Thus it could be for someone who builds without good planning, and the same is true in our relationship with Christ: if we undertake to follow him, we must recognize the cost that is involved and prepare ourselves as much as possible for it; for ambition alone is not enough to save us, and we could end in failure.

So also does Jesus give the example of a king marching into battle with 10,000 troops against another king with twice as many. In theory, it's possible to overcome a larger army if the battle is fought the right way, with the right strategy – and there are certainly historical examples that prove that theory. But if the leader has not made the proper calculations and battle plans, and put the right troops on the front lines, his army will not only lose but woefully so, with many lives lost, while the leader remains behind with a crown of shame and embarrassment.

Considering these things, we need to ask the question: What exactly is the “cost” about which our Lord speaks, in connection with being a disciple of his? He himself answers: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple”. The “cost” is twofold: carrying our crosses, and following after Christ. And these two things must always remain connected. For if we accept the cross but separate it from the following of Christ, then the result will be that we impose some arbitrary limit on what we are willing to suffer. But when he is my reference point, then I have the image of his suffering before me, and I see that my own is but a drop in the bucket compared with his.

The most challenging part of this gospel is in its opening and closing words: Christ says that we must “hate” our closest family members and “renounce” all of our possessions. The Lord is using hyperbole, like a good teacher, to drive home an important point. And the point is that we should never allow anything to stand in the way of following him – no human relationship, no material possession, no created thing. He must be the Lord of our lives, supreme in all things. But I think that deep within us – deep within our fallen human nature – there is a suspicion that God will not completely fulfill us. This is, at least in part, what led Adam and Eve to disobey. We fear giving ourselves entirely to God because we suspect we might ultimately lose something of great value.

In this regard, I continually come back to the words of Pope Benedict XVI, who addressed this very matter during his inaugural Mass as pope. Reflecting on the exhortation, “Open wide the doors to Christ!”, with which Pope John Paul II had begun his ministry, Pope Benedict said: “Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that he might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful?....

“No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing... absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship

do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction,... I say to you...: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open... wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.”

This week, may we spend some prayerful time examining ourselves and reviewing our own discipleship, asking whether we have really counted the cost and prepared ourselves prudently. It is something that we are unable to do apart from God’s grace – God, who never commands the impossible, and pledges to give us all we need when we give ourselves entirely to him. Dear Lord Jesus, please take away all of our fears about following you, and help us to serve you in complete freedom, so that we will not end in embarrassment, shame, or disgrace, but have true life with you in heaven for ever. Amen.