

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 2, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 950 words

“Honor your father and your mother” – our readings this week highlight different aspects of the fourth commandment. And like all of the commandments, what it binds us to do or not do is broader than the merely literal sense of the words; with each of the commandments there is a wider spiritual sense as well. In the case of the fourth, it applies also to the respect to be shown also to spiritual fathers and mothers and to all others in legitimate authority. Thus we teach children to respect their teachers, judges, police, priests, religious sisters, aunts, uncles, and so forth.

The fourth commandment is the only one that has a promise attached to it; the Catechism expounds upon it, saying that

Observing the fourth commandment brings its reward: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.” Respecting this commandment provides, along with spiritual fruits, temporal fruits of peace and prosperity. Conversely, failure to observe it brings great harm to communities and to individuals.¹

Thus we see in the first reading an illustration of the fulfillment of the promise: the “woman of influence” and her husband, who received the prophet Elisha into their home with gracious hospitality, are rewarded by God with the child that they had so long desired. If our reading had continued a few more verses we would have seen that the woman was incredulous; yet in spite of that, God fulfilled the promise he made through his prophet.

The gospel today adds a further consideration for our proper understanding of the fourth commandment. Christ effectively tells us that the honor of God has priority over any earthly relationship: God must be first in our lives. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Putting the Lord first can often result in conflict within our human relationships; but imagine how great the reward will be from God, in fulfillment of the commandment’s promise, if we do keep him in the first place!

The priority of honoring God over any earthly relationship brings us to consider what we might call the “flip side” of the fourth commandment: the duty that parents (and others in authority) have to help young people put God first in all things. The Catechism comments on this point as well, saying that

Family ties are important but not absolute. Just as the child grows to maturity and human and spiritual autonomy, so his unique vocation which comes from God asserts itself more clearly and forcefully. Parents should respect this call and encourage their children to follow it. They must be convinced that the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus: [– then it quotes today’s gospel –] “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”²

What really emerges in all of this is the reality of the cross – indeed, the next line of the gospel we just heard: “whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me”. How many children must die to the preconceived notions that they developed about what they

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2200.

² Ibid., no. 2232.

would do in life, in order to follow God's plan for them instead? How many parents, in turn, must do the same with respect to what they have envisioned for their children, so that they can honor God's plan above all? But let us not lose sight of the reward that God promises to those who respect the right order of things and place him first in their lives!

All of the foregoing flows from the fact of our baptism. As our patron saint says in the second reading, "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" It is Christ's death that saves us, and that death must unfold throughout our lives until we finally pass through the gates of death ourselves and then – we pray – share in his life forever in our heavenly reward. Never forget the pithy old saying, "Man proposes, God disposes" – so often we must face up to the fact that the wonderful plans we have dreamt up for ourselves (and others!) are not, in fact, what are best for us – are not what God plans for our true happiness. As Dante famously wrote, "In his will is our peace";³ when we take that often painful step of dying to self and even to others – taking up our cross to follow after Christ and place God first – ultimately we do find peace and joy.

Our Catholic tradition of prayer calls this world a "valley of tears".⁴ Putting God first is not easy. We need to be reminded of that from time to time so that we do not become easily discouraged when we are confronted with such a choice. Putting the Lord first often does mean leaving certain earthly relationships behind or at least experiencing strain in them – even family relationships. Taking up the cross and following after Christ is messy and painful. But it is only for the brief duration of our life here on earth, opening out onto the eternity of heavenly bliss. "Honor your father and your mother": how am I doing at honoring my heavenly Father above all? He promises a great reward to me if I do so. Let us all meditate upon this throughout the coming week, and resolve to live out the fourth commandment more faithfully from this day forward.

³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, canto III, line 85.

⁴ Cf., for example, the prayer *Hail, Holy Queen*.