

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – August 13, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Paul’s Cathedral, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

We have been considering the treasure that God gives us: the treasure of his Word, like a priceless pearl. This treasure, which comes to us through his Church, is for us to contemplate, assimilate, and live out; for this task we need an “understanding heart”, because we sometimes find Christ’s teachings to be challenging, and we also struggle with sin and temptation. The Lord, moreover, desires for us to share the treasure of his Word and his love with others. But perhaps, at times, we shrink back before the needs of our neighbors: whether we choose simply to “stay on the mountain” rather than going down and entering into the messiness and difficulty of their lives, or whether our sharing is done in a merely worldly way – “as the pagans do”. We forget that the gift to share is not from us but from God. For this reason, also, we have need of that “understanding heart”; thus, for two weeks now we have prayed for that very thing.

God loves us; he commands us to love our neighbors. He also wants us to love him. And this we do through prayer and worship, which is our final theme in this series. To pray is to love, and to worship is to fulfill our obligation to love the Lord. We pray and worship alone, as individuals. We pray and worship as families, in the family home, which is the domestic church. We also pray and worship here in the parish church as a community, especially on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation.

But just as we find God’s Word challenging and find it challenging to love others as we should, don’t we also find it difficult at times to love God in prayer and worship? How much of our prayer is focused on ourselves, with our wants and needs, rather than simply on loving and thanking him? How many times have we been at prayer or Holy Mass, with distraction upon distraction?

The gospel this Sunday gives us some help in diagnosing our ills when it comes to prayer and worship. When Peter has his eyes fixed on Jesus he is able to walk on water. But that also involves a great deal of faith; it involves trust; and because faith and trust are involved, there is also a certain amount of insecurity. So Peter starts to doubt. He starts to think about himself. His heart strays from Christ, and then, as he starts to sink, his eyes stray from him as well. And what is Peter’s prayer? “Lord, save me!” His focus is now on Jesus only to the extent that Jesus can help him. Otherwise, it’s about Peter, it’s about the waves, it’s about the winds, and it’s about the water that is now up to his neck.

I can relate to Peter. Over there in the rectory we have a chapel. And wouldn’t you know, sometimes, at the very moment I go there to say my prayers, when I am face to face with Christ, present there in the Holy Eucharist, a million thoughts enter into my mind! Life swirls around me like wind and waves. And the temptation is to get caught up in the wind, to think about what *I* have got to do, even to feel a bit overwhelmed, and then to ask the Lord for help with it. “Lord, save me!”, as Peter said. But is that really loving God? Is that really giving myself to him in prayer and worship? Is that really simply gazing upon him in love, faith, and trust?

It’s very easy to trick ourselves into thinking that some half-hearted prayer, full of distraction and full of ourselves, fulfills our duty toward God. But the first reading tells us very clearly: God is not in the wind, nor is he found in any other calamity. Rather, he is to be found in stillness, in the “tiny whispering sound” or “still, small voice”; the Lord is to be found, most of all, in silence. Finding God in silence takes a lot of practice. And nowadays, most of us are rather out of practice.

Our lives are filled with noise and distractions. Is it any wonder, then, if our minds are sometimes anything but still when we pray or when we worship at Holy Mass? Keeping our eyes fixed on Christ and really loving him, with faith and trust, is not easy. Sometimes we just sink,

like Peter did. But silence is the remedy. Turning off the television, setting down the magazine; limiting our time on the electronic device, listening to less talk radio or music in the car. These are not easy things to do; they involve sacrifice; in a certain sense, they are costly. But it's the cost of purchasing the pearl of great price; it's the cost of growing in the love that God so richly lavishes upon us, sharing it with others, and most of all, returning it to him. Will we pay the cost, or just keep riding the waves?

This homily, then, has, in a way, been a bit of a "prequel", because a silent space for God in our lives is really the prerequisite for being able to receive the treasure of his Word and share it with others in a distinctively Catholic way. For two weeks we have been asking the Lord for an "understanding heart": but this week, let's stop asking and start resolving – resolving to give God more silent space, and resolving also to persevere, because it truly does take some time for the winds to die down, so to speak. We mustn't get discouraged. Resolve to give God more time each day, more quality time, more silent time. And stick with it. You will see a difference: your love for him will grow, as you become more secure and confident in his love for you, and you will find yourself more ready to share the treasure of that love with others.