

Sixth Sunday of Easter, B – May 6, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 850 words

For some, living the Christian life is like walking backwards into heaven. We back away from all the things that we cannot or should not do. In other words, we follow a list of “thou shalt not’s”. Living in this rather negative way can even become burdensome, especially when we start comparing ourselves with others: “So-and-so seems to enjoy life so much; not everything he does is right; but maybe I should just loosen up a bit and let in a little sin and have some fun for a change”. Thus the temptation arises, and thus sometimes we fall.

But Christ does not call us to back our way into heaven. On the contrary: he wants us to go forward, full-throttle, into the joy of eternal life. The way he reveals for us is not a path dominated by the word “no”, but by a great “yes”: a “yes” to love. The gospel makes this clear. He says, “I no longer call you slaves”; in other words, “you are no longer bound by a master with a list of rules” – but instead, “I have called you friends”: “I have set you on equal footing with me”. And he invites us to imitate him: “Love one another *as I love you*”.

This is where we can get tripped up. The world today is very confused about the nature of love. We readily equate it with good feelings, with romance, with pleasure. Rarely do we see love in terms of the cross, much less dying on a cross. But Christ says, “Love one another as I love you” – “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. He loved us by suffering greatly, turning the other cheek, being slandered and abused, and then going to death. He invites us to do the same thing, which is to say that he invites us to imitate his spirit of sacrifice and self-renunciation.

I said at the beginning that living the Christian life should not be like backing our way into heaven. But you might be thinking now that the vision of true love that I have set forth is no different. If love means sacrificing – laying down my life – then it basically means saying no and backing away from what is not good. The key distinction, however, is in what the Lord says about being slaves versus being friends. He invites us not to follow a cold list of rules, but to imitate him – a “man like us in all things but sin”. He invites us not to be constrained like slaves, but to assent freely and embrace his life.

When we see our Christian life as the imitation of Christ, then we realize that we are moving ahead toward a beautiful goal – indeed, toward him. Each choice we make to imitate him becomes a choice to become more like him – and that is true progress toward the goal. Moreover, it is our relationship with Christ that can sustain us and give us strength to make the sacrifices necessary to move in that direction. Seen in this positive way, our saying no to something that is morally wrong means moving a step closer to the definitive good – to heaven.

We are left, then, with a simple – yet challenging – question this Sunday: Is Christ truly my friend? With our earthly friends, we nurture our relationships by doing kind things for each other. Do I perform acts of kindness for the Lord, to nurture my relationship with him? With our earthly friends, we are sure to check on them from time to time, to catch up and to make sure they are doing well. Do I touch base with the Lord Jesus, each and every day in prayer? And with our earthly friends we are not always perfect, but if there is some offense we try to make amends. Do I seek forgiveness from Christ for the ways I have offended him, above all by making good use of the sacrament of Confession, but also my doing penance and making reparation for my sins?

Friendship with God, in its simplest form, has to do with whether we are on good terms with him – whether or not we have his grace (his life) in our souls. Without grace it is impossible to live out a true friendship with Christ. Without his grace in our souls, any attempts that we

make to do as he commands are a form of slavery, following a list of rules. Only with his grace in our souls can we hope to imitate him, and indeed become like him. His grace makes our decisions to love easier, transforming them so that they bear fruit. Indeed, his grace transforms us more fully into his likeness.

Is Christ truly my friend? That is the question for us this week. If he is, may that friendship grow. If he is not, may that friendship be restored. He has called us friends; may we live each day as his friends, always going forward, toward our goal of eternal life with him.