

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – August 26, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 850 words

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”. “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Both of these decisions “for God” – in our first reading and gospel – came after reflection on how difficult his ways were. The alternatives were certainly easier. God, however, holds his people to a very high standard. He has always expected more of us than we, in ourselves, are capable of accomplishing. “For this reason”, Christ said in the gospel, “I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father.” We can only live as God commands if he helps us – and, I might add, if we accept and cooperate with that help. We are incapable of saving ourselves.

The loss of confidence in God’s help to do what he commands is one of the reasons that many today ultimately drift away from the practice of the faith. The gospel story of when Peter walked on the water is a good illustration of this: he said to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water”. “Come”, Christ said. “So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and [began to sink]”.¹ He took his eyes off Christ and, seeing all that he was up against and perhaps remembering his own weakness, down he went. The difference is that he then cried out, “Lord, save me!”; but how few turn to the Lord: I think many today keep turning further away instead.

Living God’s way also means being different. Joshua gave the Israelites a choice: be like the other nations, or serve the true God. Simon Peter might have had an easier time if he, too, took scandal at what Christ preached and went away; but he chose to stay. And think about the image of family life that is promoted so widely today, but contrasts so greatly with what St. Paul taught in the second reading: I think, for example, of TV shows that depict – with levity and a certain approval – a husband who is basically a lazy oaf; who comes home from work and zones out, neglecting his wife and children, failing to live the sacrificial love to which he is called. Indeed, failing to lead his family – with his wife having to pick up his slack.

The Lord’s way, then, is difficult: not only because it surpasses our natural strength, but also because it so often goes against what is popular and current. We tend to want to fit in and to have an easy time of it. But look at the crucifix, and see if those were the values that our Lord had. Oh, but it was not easy for him, either: “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me”, he said. Do not forget what he added, though: “Yet not my will, but thine be done”.² Consider also our Blessed Mother, standing beneath that same cross: she did not scramble, trying to save her Son in a panic, perhaps begging the soldiers to take him down and let him live. No. She stood there. She prayed. She said “yes”. “Be it done unto me according to thy word”.³

Before Our Lady said “yes” to God for the first time, the angel told her that “nothing shall be impossible for [him]”.⁴ With the help of his grace we can do all things. And we must cultivate this confidence. But how can we do so? It starts with daily resolve: “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”. “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” It continues with daily prayer, in which we expose our weaknesses and lack to God’s love and seek from him the help we need. It comes from repentance and starting again, whenever we fail. And in that connection, it comes also from good, frequent, and fruitful reception of the sacraments, the principal means of grace that Christ has given us.

¹ Matthew 14:28-32.

² Matthew 26:39.

³ Luke 1:38.

⁴ Luke 1:37.

For us Catholics, then, maybe being different isn't so bad: we have the powerful help of the sacraments on our side! When we make a good confession, God's grace is restored or increased in us, helping us grow in strength to keep his moral law. (Perhaps fewer people would fear confession and seek it so infrequently, if they saw more clearly how it can give rise to confidence in the God who is on our side and wants to help us live the way he commands!) When we receive Holy Communion worthily and with recollection, Christ not only gives us himself, but pours out many graces besides, making us more like him. The Lord does call us to an impossible task: he alone can make it possible. May he grant us an increase in confidence in him and in the means that he gives us, so that we may daily renew our resolve to follow his way.