

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – February 3, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

This gospel continues the passage we heard last Sunday, in which Christ proclaimed the jubilee year – a time of liberation, pardon, and peace. The crowd gathered round him marveled at his words: after all, who does not desire such benefits? But those same people will quickly turn on the Lord; they will ultimately find his words to be completely unacceptable. It says that they became “filled with fury” and even sought to throw him off the cliff. Amidst all this drama there is an important lesson for us to learn also.

Why were the people so angry? Well, Jesus had made a rather serious charge against them. He first reminded them of how Israel – God’s chosen people – so often had rejected the prophets that God himself had sent them. Recalling this would have filled them with shame, and anger often accompanies shame, because we don’t like to remember shameful things. Then, he reminded them of how, because of Israel’s historic infidelity, God had, at times, saved others who were in need, instead of them. Now shame and anger are joined with fear, as they consider that perhaps they might ultimately be excluded.

I would say that jealousy also arose in their hearts. In the gospels we see repeatedly that the people hoped for a political Messiah who would definitively smack down their enemies and exalt the status of Israel. But Christ effectively rejects such a narrow vision here; he’s telling them that God wishes to save all, even those who do not belong to the children of Israel. And he puts them on notice: they might be excluded, if they do not learn from their own history of infidelity as a people. The ironic thing is, by wanting to throw him off the cliff, they seek then and there to repeat that history. “But Jesus”, the gospel tells us, “passed through the midst of them and went away.”

Haven’t we, at times, also wanted our enemies to be eliminated? Isn’t that sometimes the natural reaction that arises from our fallen nature, when someone offends or hurts us? At best, we might think: I wish they would just go away. At worst, we might wish some sort of harm on them, or even want them dead. But this is not the will of God at all. He desires that all the people he created be saved. He knew and personally chose each and every one of us in the beginning: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you”, as the first reading said. And his new covenant in Christ is not directed only to a small group of elect, but to all. Some – perhaps very many – ultimately do repeat history and reject God; scripture warns us that the path to destruction is wide and easy. But God’s will – his desire – remains: none should be lost.

Christ therefore teaches us elsewhere in the gospel that we are to love our enemies. When someone offends or hurts us, there may naturally be anger and upset that arise in our hearts. But we need to get to the point where we can forgive them, pray for them, wish them well: “Save them, Lord”; “Help them to convert, Lord”; “Do not let them be lost, Lord”! Look at what is happening in the world today – truly evil things seemingly at every turn, originating from the malice of some men and women. Do we have the capacity to pray for them, to wish them well? Or are we like the people in the gospel, who might instead throw them off a cliff?

St. Paul reminds us about the greatest of spiritual gifts in our second reading: love. His beautiful hymn to love is often read at weddings. But it is not only for spouses – it is for all. Paul tells us, for example, that love “does not brood over injury”, “does not rejoice over wrongdoing”; even that it “hopes all things” – such as, for example, the conversion and ultimate salvation of our greatest enemies! Finally, he tells us that love is the bridge from this world to the next. If we are not filled with love, we will find no happiness in heaven. Love is our destiny; it is our calling. A heart filled with love is capable of forgiving; a heart filled with love is capable of accepting God’s will that none should be lost, making that its own wish as well.

This week, as we examine our consciences in light of these readings – and perhaps also consider what is going on in the world around us – we are challenged on our capacity to love. Love is not only for family and friends. It is not for a small, elect group from which many may be excluded. It is for all. This is God’s will for us. Loving does not mean approving of what is evil. Love is willing what is good for another. In the case of our enemies, that is willing their conversion, willing their repentance – desiring that they, God’s creatures also, may not be lost. If you struggle with this type of love – and I think we all do from time to time – then look and meditate upon the crucifix. Look at the one who looks upon you with love, having known you from eternity: who died for you, who died for all, and desires that all should be saved.