

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – August 25, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

At first glance, it seems Our Lord was not very interested in the question asked by the anonymous person along the way – “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” – for he does not offer a direct answer. It would behoove us, however, to consider what might have led this person to ask what he did. His doubt was not unreasonable: who among us doesn’t wonder how many will be saved, and indeed, if we will be among that number? But the context in which this question was made also sheds light on the indirect answer that Christ gave. For he had come preaching the hope of salvation, demonstrating it with mighty deeds and wonders. Yet so few seemed to receive his message and begin following him.

Oh, there were many interested onlookers; those who were intrigued, but who, ultimately, did not assimilate Jesus’ teaching. Many did not make his way of life theirs because of how challenging it was. Think of those very demanding words, “If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me”.<sup>1</sup> Our Lord would later add, “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me *cannot be my disciple*”.<sup>2</sup> But who wants to deny himself? Who wants to carry a cross? Who wants to take the path of suffering that our Lord did? It is a very challenging way indeed. And so few seemed to be responding to his call. If this was indeed the way of salvation, then, would very many be saved?

Well, it is always tempting and, in a certain sense, easier to focus on others. I am reminded of the last part of John’s gospel. Peter had just reconciled with Christ by the seashore: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Feed my sheep.” But immediately after that beautiful scene, discord again enters in. For Christ tells Peter how he will die. “Amen, amen, I say to you: when you were young, you girded yourself and went where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and lead you where you do not wish to go.” Peter points to John and says, “Lord, what about this man?” But Jesus answers, “...what is that to you? Follow me!”<sup>3</sup>

To each one of us, also, Christ says: “Come, follow me. Don’t focus on everyone else to the neglect of my call. *You, follow me!*” Salvation is always the result of a personal call and response. That is why he says in today’s passage, “people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” He effectively states: “you will be surprised when you see who ultimately is saved”. Some who were outside the Church will be there, or whom we otherwise saw as “last”. But all who make it will have arrived by taking the narrow way that he indicates – indeed, by following him.

It can be discouraging when we glance about and see how few seemingly are taking the narrow path. When we consider our world today it may indeed not seem histrionic to wonder if anyone will “make it”. But we need not focus only on the abundance of negativity; there are many positive signs also. I see so much positivity right here in front of me, and I mean that sincerely. In any case, our concern – along with the anonymous man of the gospel – is well-placed, for we recognize how urgent salvation is. Jesus says to us today and each day: “follow me”. “Do not only be onlookers, who might hope to make it in the end, but won’t walk the walk to get there. No, be active participants in answering my call and accepting my grace.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:23.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:27.

<sup>3</sup> John 21:1-22.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Year of the Lord’s Favour*, Vol. 3 (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2012), pp.103-105.

But the way is narrow and difficult – especially when we forget about that grace. God’s grace saves us and is the only thing that makes following his way possible. The man in the gospel’s question was valid, but it was not fitting for the Lord to give him a direct response, for his concern was misplaced. Christ’s answer taught him not to focus so much on others, but on him: “You, follow me!” In our intimacy with Jesus, we gradually see the unfolding of his transformative grace in us, and so grow in our confidence of it. With his grace, all things are possible. He “treats [us] as sons”! So let us “strengthen [our] drooping hands and... weak knees” and “[make] straight paths for our feet”,<sup>5</sup> persevering confidently on the narrow path.

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<sup>5</sup> From the second reading.