

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – September 8, 2019 – Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 715 words

We should reflect more on what it means to take up our crosses and follow Christ, as he bids us do in the gospel. For it could well happen at times that we feel ourselves to be more the victim of the cross: from dashed plans to serious illness, from family drama to problems in our world, the temptation in carrying our crosses may be to do so as a sort of unwilling victim – that is, if we don’t push it away entirely. But the two examples that our Lord gives after he bids us take up our crosses help us to understand, rather, that he wants us truly to embrace the cross and be active participants in our redemption – not passive recipients.

Before we examine these two examples, however, we should recall the radicalness of what Jesus says. We are to “hate” our family members; moreover, we are to “renounce” all our possessions! For whatever hyperbole might be involved in his teaching, one thing is clear: he is saying that he must be our all. It is only in that framework – where God is first, where our lives are wholly directed to him as our final end – that we can hope truly to be his disciples. Most of us know fairly well the dilemmas that arise: with family compromise scenarios, with the allure of material things. This is all very much easier said than done. But do, we must.

So let us consider the two images our Lord gives us, to understand how we are to embrace the cross willingly. The first is about calculating the cost before building. Some people go through life without doing this; they “wing it”. They have a sort of blind and blithe trust that somehow, everything will always work out. And when it does not – that is, when the cross comes ‘round – they may indeed end up playing the victim. But let’s apply this to discipleship: because they do not intentionally live as disciples, they will likely not be disciples in fact. They will fail to complete the specific plan that God has for them – a plan that includes the cross.

The second image is that of the king marching into battle against a larger army. Overcoming a greater force is certainly not impossible, but the right strategy and people on the front lines are needed. Consider, moreover, what is at stake: namely, the lives of many. Not to take the time to make the appropriate battle plan would be a gross failure of responsibility, with the cost being measured in human lives. A major part of discipleship is a battle – against sin and evil. If we don’t work out a strategy, can we hope to win? But so many do not approach it this way. Rather, they sally forth into the fray of life, risking all: their own life, their soul.

When we distill Christ’s teaching, what emerges is that he wants us to be, as I said, active participants in our salvation. This means seeing the cross not as a victim, but as the recipient of God’s providence.¹ Nothing happens by mistake. Everything that happens is an opportunity. The change of plans? Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise – or at least, a penance for my sins. The serious illness? Maybe it’s saving me from a worse fate – or at the very least, it gives me something to offer to God in satisfaction for my many failures till now. But if I were to flee the cross in these cases and so many others, I would fail as a disciple.

The one who has calculated the cost and come up with a battle plan – putting God first in his or her life, ahead of other human beings and even material possessions – knows that hardship and difficulty will indeed come. For, as the Lord himself said, “No disciple is greater than his master”.² But we are his disciples – or at least we wish to be. Discipleship – which means following Christ, learning from Christ, and imitating Christ – is not for unwilling victims, but for active participants. The Lord lays out exactly the path that each of us needs. Much of that path remains veiled to our eyes: but when each stage becomes clear, we need to embrace it.

¹ Rev. Peter John Cameron, O.P., *To Praise, To Bless, To Preach*, Cycle C (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), pp. 113-114.

² Luke 6:40.