

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – October 6, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30 and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 700 words

The Lord Jesus commanded us many things; they can all be summed up in the two-fold commandment of love of God and love of neighbor. His likening us to “unprofitable servants” if we merely fulfill his commandments is not meant to discourage us, but to correct that natural tendency of our fallen nature to crave recognition and so do things for that reason. He wants to purify our motives. Make no mistake: when we do what is right he is pleased, and he will reward us. However, he wants us to do it without strings attached. In this and so many other ways in the gospels he summons us to a purer love of God.

But have you ever *felt* “unprofitable”? Some translations use a different but no less depressing word – “useless”. Usually, if we feel this way in the Lord’s sight, it is precisely because we did not succeed in doing what he commanded; we failed in some way. And this feeling may become especially acute when we keep struggling with failure. Have you ever felt defeated because you had the same old things to say when you went to confession? Have you ever had a good run at staying out of some sin, thinking you had truly moved past it, then fell into it again? “Unprofitable”! We may indeed be tempted to feel that way in such circumstances.

What I am describing is, in fact, discouragement. It is one of the devil’s great tricks. When we give in, he has us where he wants us. Discouragement causes us to be sad; to lose hope and want to abandon the struggle. Sometimes it leads us to assign arbitrary limits beyond which we will not go; for example: “I have fought with this long enough and cannot overcome it – I give up”. But in his Letter to the Hebrews, St. Paul responds to that: he says, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood”.<sup>1</sup> The he bids us strengthen our weak knees and get back in the race to win.<sup>2</sup>

But overcoming discouragement may well be easier said than done. To some, that verse from the Letter to the Hebrews might sound rather like a bitter helping of “tough love”, when one might hope for a spoonful of sugar instead. The struggle with sin can be intense – as can be those feelings of sadness and despair that we cannot always easily dismiss with a command. Feelings are also frequently hard to manage. They are what they are; there is often an irrational character to them, or they might be unreasonably strong. We need to be able to identify and get at the root of discouragement if we would avoid giving in to it.

The prophet Habakkuk was discouraged in the first reading. Recall his rather scathing complaint against God: “How long, O Lord? I cry for help, but you do not listen! I cry out to you, ‘Violence!’, but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery?” If that’s not discouragement, I don’t know what is. But the prophet is griping about what we, in Christian terms, know as “the cross”. Life is not easy – sometimes terribly so. God responds by urging him to have faith – the virtue spoken of also by Jesus in the gospel. That faith is in God and his plan – not in one’s own wishes and designs.

Yes, if we grapple with discouragement, it could well be because we have misplaced expectations about what a life in Christ looks like – Christ, who tells us to bear the cross like he did. And that effectively means that our faith is weak, for it excludes, to some extent, a key element of the Christian life. The remedy, then, is not only to pray for a deeper and more complete faith, but to meditate on the crucifix. For nothing we suffer (no matter how long!) remotely approaches what he endured. But something remarkable can also happen when we pray in that way: we see and come to experience better his great love – the love that saves. And that gives us courage.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 12:4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hebrews 12:12.