

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – February 16, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 725 words

“If you choose, you can keep the commandments of God; they will save you” – so our first reading began. But I think we can all respond: if only it were that easy; if only we could simply “choose” to “keep the commandments”! In our struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, we often enough come out on the losing side: we fail in small ways all the time, and sometimes in bigger ways, too. And we are in good company, for even St. Paul lamented about this struggle, writing in one of his letters: “I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want”.¹ The strength of our own wills is insufficient.

But the Lord Jesus, in the gospel, upholds and strongly re-asserts the moral law, bidding us to keep its commands. Moreover, he raises the bar very high, for he tells us that our righteousness must surpass “that of the scribes and Pharisees” in order to “enter the kingdom of heaven”. They were known for a rather rigorous external observance of the law and they prided themselves on how well they did. But that pride, as well as the other defects of their intentions, is precisely what kept them from being truly righteous in God’s sight. Well then, doesn’t the Lord give us an impossible task? The answer is “yes”. It is, indeed, impossible for us.

We cannot save ourselves – as I remind every so often in my preaching. I repeat myself on this because, in our world today, the idea is widely held that salvation is possible apart from God. Whether it is in the focus on health and prosperity, on being “woke” and in the “in crowd”, or on achieving some other enlightened state, the world continually tells us the lie that we are self-sufficient. “So what, if you fail sometimes in keeping the Ten Commandments with all their implications? That’s old-fashioned and outdated anyhow!...”, the world exclaims, before offering us so many alternatives that do not fulfill us in this life and could never do so in the next.

“If you choose, you can keep the commandments of God; they will save you”: the cooperation of our will – our decision, our choice to do what is right – is key. But from there, we must immediately and assiduously depend upon the Lord. First we decide, then we depend. And the commandments humble us; they make us realize how much we need a savior. They require us to deny ourselves and delay our gratification. And that self-denial is unto death, for not only does it cause us to die to ourselves, but we must also continually practice it as long as we have the breath of life in this world. First we decide, then we depend.

Isn’t it still difficult, though? Think about the sin of lust, which our Lord highlights in the gospel. Lust wants to take and use. It is opposed to love, which gives and serves. But is lust not one of our strongest foes? Here is a good example of how the commandments humble us: for in the face of a temptation to lust, we can indeed feel rather impotent. St. Paul had something to say about that, also. He spoke about the proverbial thorn in his side that assailed him – maybe it was lust, maybe it was something else; we don’t know. But then Paul realized that when he was weak, the Lord was strong.² God does humble us. But he alone can overcome all our foes.

Sin is in the will. I may be beset with all kinds of temptations, but if I do not consent to them, I have not sinned. And if I am successful, it is because I decided and I depended: I turned to the Lord for his strength. Only with God’s grace is it possible. It is that other-worldly wisdom that St. Paul told about in the second reading, which sets us on the path to that place which no words can describe. The wisdom of this world, though, only leads to that other place. We ask the Lord in this Holy Mass for the grace not only to choose to keep the commandments more consistently, but in doing so, to depend upon him more completely. We ask him to be our savior.

¹ Romans 7:19.

² Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.