

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, A – February 23, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30am and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 800 words

If you were to poll an average Catholic on the street concerning what it means to be “holy”, many would probably respond that it meant things like praying a lot, being a good person, keeping the commandments, being joyful, and the like. In other words, they would describe some things that typically have to do with holiness. But the Lord, in the first reading, explains holiness very simply: in saying, “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy”, he effectively tells us that being holy is being like him. As we pray in the Gloria, he “alone is the holy one”; he is holiness itself.

But how do we end up becoming like God? Our second reading and gospel tell us the secret: our minds must be transformed. There is the wisdom of this world; there is the wisdom of God. Only God’s wisdom can save us, but pursuing it requires us to swim against the tide. Consider how much our society attempts to dictate how we should live today! There is, as it were, a popular “holiness” that it calls us to achieve: and we do so when we think like everyone else, do what the majority finds acceptable, and so forth. Yes, our society calls us to political correctness. But no amount of fitting in can save us.

Pursuing God’s wisdom involves rising above prevailing ideologies and groupthink, striving to see reality how God does, and then living in accord with it. And taking that path causes us to grow more mature – to “grow up” – in Christ. Consider what Jesus said to St. Peter after the resurrection: “Amen, amen, I say to you: when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and lead you where you did not wish to go.” Yes, we, too, were immature. But hopefully, as we have aged, we are allowing God to lead us.

But is it true, that God leads us to where we did not wish to go? You bet. Think of children: if you let them dress themselves, feed themselves, and choose their own entertainment, things generally do not end well. But we are all like children in God’s sight. Left to ourselves, we simply do not and cannot consistently desire and strive after the things that will get us to heaven. And anyway, we would rather take the easiest path. We truly cannot “get there from here” without divine intervention. We need his grace. Following God – indeed, being led by him – is our only option. And doing so means allowing him to lead us.

Lent, which begins on Wednesday, is a privileged time for us to submit to God’s wisdom more fully – and to do so not just as individuals but as a collective. “You are the temple of God”, St. Paul said – he was using the plural “you” – “y’all”. God’s temple is built of living stones – of individual believers joined together as a group – striving toward a shared goal and animated by God’s Spirit. We need each other on the journey. Not only is this journey impossible without God’s grace – but we really can’t complete it without each other, either. There is special grace in Lent, because we join forces to be led more fully by the Lord.

And as I said, we accomplish this by allowing God to transform our minds; by being converted. The hallmarks of Lent – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – help us do this. Where we would rather turn in on our own interests and distractions, prayer calls us out and turns us to God. Where we would rather fill ourselves, fasting challenges us to seek fulfillment in the Lord. Where we might hold on to and accumulate treasure, almsgiving reminds us that our true treasure is in heaven. And in all of this, we have the benefit of being united with the larger community that makes up God’s temple, drawing strength not only from the Lord but from each other.

How will you keep the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving this Lent? How will you employ them so that the Lord may more fully lead you to be holy as he is holy – to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect? We should have a solid and realistic plan; we should

count the cost beforehand. Then we should strive to stick with it all the way till Easter, knowing that millions of others are doing the same. Lent is such a great gift of Christ through his Church, a privileged time of grace! The Lord sets a very high standard for us all, but he offers us every help to achieve it – including the help and support of each other.