

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 5, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 7:15, 8:30, and 11am Sunday Masses – 1,035 words

Our non-Catholic Christian friends tend to emphasize the primacy of a personal relationship with Christ; going to church – and for some, even being baptized – is secondary, if not unnecessary. But the risk we Catholics run, with our emphasis on common liturgical worship and a prayer life rooted in the seven sacraments, is that of diminishing the importance of having that personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Today’s gospel is an important corrective in that regard. For us, yes, the sacramental life and liturgical worship are essential. But it is equally important that we know the one whom we worship and meet in the sacraments – and indeed, that we come to know him intimately. The challenge, as in so many areas of Catholic life, is to see and embrace the “both/and” – not fall back on a simplistic “either/or”.

“Come to me”, Jesus says. What a beautiful passage – one of the most consoling in all the gospels! How appealing, the thought of finding rest in him and learning from him. And amidst the heavy burdens we carry in this valley of tears, how wonderful it sounds, that with him, our load may be easier and lighter. But for however beautiful this passage is, it’s also equally difficult to put into practice. How many of us have really succeeded in laying down our burdens at the Lord’s feet and finding relief and rest there? Maybe there are moments, but then we turn on the news again and hear about the latest shooting or other calamity, about the Covid case numbers or some other worry. We are continually being challenged in new ways – and thus learning how far we still have to go.

Well, at this point, I risk becoming even more of a broken record than usual. In recent weeks I spoke to you about confronting fears, especially through the prayer of the Holy Rosary; and of making an offering of self to God, especially at the moment of Holy Communion. We could easily rehash those same messages in the present connection, also. But I think it important that we briefly consider a new angle: that of self-abandonment as an avenue to greater intimacy with Christ. The cross, as we regularly encounter it, is really too heavy for us; but it is nothing for our Lord. When he tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden light, he says that as the one who would bear the weight of the whole world in his passion and death. He says it as almighty God, for whom there can be no limitation.

And the path to self-abandonment – of giving ourselves entirely to him – that he proposes for us requires us to be childlike, to be “little ones”. A person’s relationship with his parents is ordinarily cemented in early childhood. That is when the profound and lifelong bond of parent and child forms. But we have lost our childlike innocence in relation to God because of sin; it is, therefore, necessary for us, over and over again, to pursue spiritual childhood anew, so that our bond with the Lord may grow stronger. We need to be very small before him – but not so that we may feel overwhelmed by his greatness. No, that is not how a child feels; rather, even as he feels small and dependent, he also feels loved. So, too, should we cultivate the sense of smallness before God – but also of being profoundly loved by him.

And in the context of that littleness before the Lord, in which we strive to depend more fully on him like a child and see how he loves us, we can also gain better perspective on the true weight of our crosses. For they are truly only a tiny sliver of what he bore as a whole. And if the total burden for him is light, then our small portion of it is as nothing – for him, at least. But here is precisely where an intimate dialogue with the Lord can help us experience an ease of burden as we abandon ourselves more fully. We can find rest, as we learn from him – there, in the shelter of his Sacred Heart, which was pierced for our offenses. For there we can behold the reality of his suffering and see that our present difficulties were included in his passion and death and so redeemed also by his Resurrection.

Yes, we need to make ourselves small before him and see that he loves us – but we must also speak to him about our burdens and see them in context with his. This requires an investment of time – and it presupposes that silence within which we may not only speak but also hear, perceiving his response. But how can we expect to grow in intimacy with one to whom we do not give quality time? And how can we possibly hear him, if we make him compete with this world’s noise? Think of the beauty of a mother resting with her child on her shoulder. Noise is one of the greatest enemies of peace today. We do well to set aside this time to worship liturgically and to participate in the sacraments. We do better if it then leads us to other meaningful times of silence, in which we can learn from and rest with Christ.

The Lord’s “dominion [is] from sea to sea”, the first reading instructed us. “He shall proclaim peace to the nations”. How we yearn to experience this peace within the security of his reign. But the way to it is not through any noisy show of power, but through meekness and childlikeness. He modeled this for us himself by riding into Jerusalem on an ass – on a rather slow, unintelligent beast of burden – in fulfillment of the prophecy. That slow, steady, and humble approach is our way forward also: seeking him out regularly – in silence; being small before him and knowing that he loves us; contemplating the weight that he bore; seeing our burden within it and abandoning ourselves to him; and learning, as he whispers quietly to our hearts. This is what he offers when he says, “Come to me... and I will give you rest”.