

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – August 30, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 7:15 and 8:30am Masses – 825 words

Have you ever been tempted to have resentment toward God? To say, like Jeremiah the prophet did in the first reading, “You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped!”? Usually such sentiments arise when we encounter a heavy spate of setbacks and problems. But we can also be lured this way through jealousy over seeing how others, who apparently do not live for God, encounter such prosperity and success. And for those of us who remember a time when we ourselves were not living for the Lord, we may even conclude that things were better back then: life was easier and less problematic – until we started following Christ.

King David once expressed a similar sentiment. In Psalm 73, he told how he had been “envious of the arrogant, / when [he] saw the prosperity of the wicked. / For they have no pangs, / their bodies are sound and sleek. / They are not in trouble as other men are... / Therefore”, he continued, “pride is their necklace; / violence covers them as a garment,... / their hearts overflow with follies. / They scoff and speak with malice... / They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.” Then, after such bitter complaining, he expresses wonder over whether “...in vain [he had] kept [his] heart clean.”

So whether we are upset over our own bad fortune or over the good fortune of the godless, we are in good company: these are very typical, very human struggles. But what do we do with this kind of temptation? We need to ask if it is true: Has God really duped us? Has he been unfair? And this week’s gospel gives us a quick answer: right after rebuking Peter most strongly for having been thinking in worldly terms, Christ turns to the whole group of disciples and tells them: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” – and that he “will repay [each] according to his conduct”.

“For what profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” We are to have a supernatural outlook – a vision that goes beyond the mere confines of this world. And we are to embrace suffering – a suffering which is not generic and meaningless, but flows from and back to the cross of Christ. He warns us amply, both here and in many other places, that we will have to suffer like he did. But many of us seemingly have a line at which we effectively say, “here, and no further”. Has not 2020 felt that way at times? I know it has for me on several days. Our Lord, however, simply tells us to follow him.

Yes, he has forewarned us about suffering; he has not duped us. If he told us exactly how much we would suffer, we quite likely would not follow him. Although, in a certain sense, we must admit that he has told us how much, for he associates our suffering with his – and he suffered profoundly, giving all. It is not for us, therefore, to place limits on what our share shall be. He knows what we need for our growth in holiness, for our perfection – that is, for our preparation for eternal life. If we strive to maintain a supernatural outlook – a vision that goes beyond this world – then even in the midst of our trials, we will see heaven on the horizon.

But what of that resentment that can arise from seeing the good fortune of the godless? In the psalm that I cited, David did reach a resolution. After wondering if he had kept himself clean in vain, he continued: “...I tried to understand all this, / it was too difficult for me, / Till I entered the sanctuary of God / and came to understand their end” – that is, of those who live as if God did not exist, yet enjoy so many blessings in this life. In other words, when David found it difficult to keep a supernatural outlook, he placed himself in God’s presence. He took his complaint to God in prayer – and he helped him see the truth.

And this really brings us full-circle. Jeremiah’s disillusion about being duped was also a prayer: he was speaking to God. The Lord can handle our frank and honest discourse; we need to tell him how we feel. But we should also be prepared for his response. Christ has invited us to take

up the cross and follow him; he will not allow us to lay the cross down while somehow remaining his disciples! No, we should seek from him, rather, the grace to regain or grow in a supernatural outlook – a holy attitude adjustment, as it were; for he will repay us according to our conduct, with a reward far greater than anything we can have in this world.