

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – June 26, 2022 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 777 words

The story of Elijah and Elisha, great prophets of the Old Testament, is not always an easy one to understand. But the passage we heard in the first reading today has a very clear point that we can readily grasp: namely, that Elisha went back to tie up loose ends before he followed Elijah, and in doing so, he sacrificed his entire present and his entire future. In other words, when he slaughtered his livestock and used his plowing equipment as fuel to cook the results of the slaughter, he effectively destroyed those things that gave him security in the present and hope that he would have what he needed in the future. What if following Elijah as a prophet did not work out? Elisha would have nothing to fall back on; he would have to start over entirely. So he made a great leap of faith in responding to what he perceived to be his life's call.

The psalm tells us of a similar concept. The response was, "You are my inheritance, O Lord". And the psalmist then addresses the Lord as, "my allotted portion and my cup.... You will not abandon my soul to the netherworld.... You will show me the path to life." This is what is known as a priestly psalm, and to understand these phrases we need to recall that priests in ancient Israel were a tribe all their own. While all of the eleven other tribes of Israel were given a plot of land (something like their own state), the priestly tribe did not have any land. They did not have the earthly security that owning a piece of property and reaping its fruits provided. Their security was God himself: he was their inheritance, their allotted portion. In serving God as priests, they had to look to him both for their present and their future.

The gospel, then, also speaks to us about stepping out in faith to follow God and seeking all that we need to do so from him alone. Christ addresses those who would follow him and exhorts them to do so immediately, without turning back. "No one who sets a hand to the plow", he says, "and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God". Yet so many people today find it too difficult to respond to God's call – whatever it may be – with this kind of faith. Most of us under a certain age have grown up in a world where there is practically always a second chance and a backup plan – in other words, a world in which there are very few remaining situations where the only option is to live with the consequences. Our modern situation is one in which people fear commitments and are often unable to make them.

The Lord, however, continues to call men and women to particular vocations, to states in life through which they will leave their past behind, be configured to a new way, and look to the Lord for both their present and their future. He calls men to be priests or brothers; he calls women to be sisters or nuns; and everyone is ordered by human nature itself to marriage and family – the path that the overwhelming majority follows. But in all three areas, "the numbers are down"; so many are having difficulty making a commitment and stepping out in faith. We are living in a dramatic situation. God has not changed: he still invites, he still encourages, he still calls, and he still offers the grace. But society most certainly has changed, such that many lack confidence in the power of Christ's grace to help us follow where he leads.

Yet even if society has changed, human nature never changes. Like Elisha, we, too, are capable of making great sacrifices to step out in faith and follow God's call. In this crazy world where consequences are systematically diminished or eradicated and people often feel so isolated, let us remember the very human need for accompaniment – in good times and in bad. I have preached recently, in fact, on the isolation that many experience nowadays. We need to be there for others, to encourage and support them. And we need to ask God to use our hearts, our hands, and our voices to help others know where he is leading them and to follow him with a confident faith. This week we can all ponder whether and how we have encouraged and been there for others, to help them make and then live out a life commitment.

Vocations – whether to marriage, priesthood, or religious life – are the responsibility of us all!