

25th Sunday Ordinary Time

September 20-21, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20-24, 27; Matt. 20:1-16

Many people would find this week's second reading a most difficult one with which to relate. After all, it seems as if Saint Paul is actually seriously entertaining the thought that it would be better to leave this world completely. How is that possible? Is that wrong to think? The answers to those questions depend an awful lot on the particular circumstances of the person seeking to answer them.

I hope that we could all agree that it is not good to run away from challenges, that we ought not to take the easy way out in life. You have heard it said regarding the tragic choice when someone takes his or her own life- suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Sadly, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death amongst Americans.¹ More Americans die from self-inflicted means than from fatal auto accidents. In no way can it be approved, and yet at the same time the Church in her wisdom and in the compassion of Jesus knows that there have been situations in which people felt completely trapped, backed into a corner and feeling as though they had no way out.

Of course, that is not true- with Christ there is always a way out. It is equally true that in this case, Paul was not contemplating taking his own life. Rather, he was reflecting on the tug towards being with the Lord that he felt- so much so that he could not help but contemplate that for him, it would appear much better to be with the Lord now. But he quickly "comes back to earth," realizing that it is not about what is best for us. That selfish attitude is the antithesis of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was anything but selfish. Still, he longed for his ultimate goal- namely, life in Christ Jesus. And there is nothing blameworthy about that.

¹ Center for Disease Control, Facts at a Glance, 2010, an average of 105 suicides per day.

Still, we are not the arbiters of our lives. Neither our life nor our death is to be of our own making. I can distinctly recall seeing the faces of people certain issues of National Geographic magazine, whether they were photos of bleak Soviet era barracks during the Cold War or people living on the outskirts of society. Sometimes a still photo speaks more eloquently than anything else. People looked so distraught and unhappy, and they probably had some very good reasons to feel this way. Where was the hope?

To one degree or another, we have all felt frustrated in life. “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves.”² But today’s second reading provides some key insights into how we are to approach life. It mustn’t be all about what we desire, even if that desire is for eternal presence with God. There is a reason why each of us is here. We do not choose our time. God placed us here at this time, not a century ago or a century from now. He called us to this life, to go forth and transform the world now. And in due time he will call us home.

Our Gospel reminds us that some come to the realization of their God-given vocation to holiness much later in life- some even appear to sneak in the back way at the last moment. This appears to be manifestly unfair, and it certainly would not pass muster with the National Labor Relations Board! But, rather than cry “foul,” we are invited to be grateful that the Lord invited them to partake of the banquet, because the important point is that they came.

The love of the Lord has the ability to turn on its heels our pre-conceived categories of first and last. None of us deserves heaven- it will be pure gift. And we ought desire to be there.

² Matthew 11:28

But for now, the Lord invites us to live on earth with all the fullness possible, experiencing both its many joys as well as its sorrows. Surely, there comes a time when we long much less for earthly joys, and this ought not to be construed as ingratitude to God. Our longing for heaven ought to grow as we grow older.

Still, our time has not yet come. Let us leave it up to God, and trust that He will bring us home in due season, perhaps in the blink of an eye or perhaps much longer. Our work is still here. God is not done with us just yet.