

**Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time:**

Behind every good sports team or individual athletic competitor there is usually a competent trainer or coach. That person indicates and even insists on what must be done in order for the athlete to be victorious. The Lord Jesus, in the Gospel passage today, inaugurates the victory over evil by organizing his “team,” that is to say, the apostles, into specific modes of acting in order to be victorious over the forces of evil and anything which is not of God.

Jesus gathers his followers together and becomes the trainer or coach of the highest quality and gives very clear instructions. He emphasizes that certain things, such as the love of money, external appearances, food, prestige, status, and the like, are not the most important things in life, and that there is something much more central needed to carry us through this life and into the next.

Christ tells his apostles that the essence of it all is to have their feet on the ground and to live in the present, always aware of the great compassion of God. The Lord tells his followers to wear sandals and carry a walking stick, a way of saying, be on your way and keep to your mind on what is in front of you, rather than what is behind, in the past. These instructions of long ago to the followers of Jesus are for us as well. We are called to work for the good of all and to fight against evil within or around us.

Perhaps the most important teaching of our Lord is about the primacy of the spiritual. The material world is not the most important, though we often think it is, since it confronts us so flagrantly every day. We are accustomed as humans to give a lot of value to what is passing, things like health, wealth and beauty. In social interaction, or seeking a job, for example, we know employers are most often looking for who “looks right” for the part, more than who might be the most qualified. This is of course a sad commentary on how the world operates.

For our Lord, such things are not the essence of life or what bring us true life now and the reward of everlasting life. Our God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to share completely our human weakness and sorrow, even to the point of death on the cross. We are called to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, which entails suffering and dying in order to rise from death to life eternal. We are called to live even in the midst of evil, confident that it cannot overcome us unless we let it.

We believe that the power of Christ over sin and death is more powerful than the forces of evil. In other words, we may be tempted, we may even fall, but the loving action of God, who freely gives sanctifying and actual grace, is ever ready to dominate our lives and bring us closer to the Lord who made us. We need only admit our sins and seek reconciliation. For us Catholics this is most readily done in the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession.

In order to save us, Jesus was not content to talk in theory, but in the concrete of life with its real struggles and the real presence of a God who “precedes and follows us, who places the hand of blessing upon our head,” as Psalm 138(139) expresses it.

The Lord is clear that in the work of being a follower of Christ and one who proclaims of the Gospel, the message will sometimes be met with joy and at other times with derision.

Furthermore, the message of salvation is never to be forced upon others, but given as a gift with a promise of receiving something greater than life itself. As people with free will, we have the option of ignoring the gifts of God or even outright rejecting them. It is no surprise that Saint Paul refers to it as the “weight of glory,” for its tremendous possibilities and the gravity of the risk of losing it by the choices we make.

The Lord tells his hearers: “If any place will not receive you or hear you, shake its dust from your feet in testimony against them.” In other words, do all you can, be zealous and persistent, but there may come a point when there is nothing more that can be done, and your mission has to be left completely in the hands of a loving God. That is the principle of non-forced conversations, something that has not always been honored in the course of the centuries of Gospel proclamation.

The twelve apostles eventually return to report their experiences, some of it good and some of it not. It is no different from our own experience today. The work we do, our fatigue or frustrations, the insecurity we may feel in what we are asked to do, cannot be denied, and must be given back to the Lord who knows and accepts our efforts, even our failures, always ready to forgive and heal us.

When we return to the Lord, and that we do presumably every day in our life of prayer, we admit that we need the help of God to know how to act. In order to be able to put into action what we know must be done, we are dependent on the grace of God always and everywhere. We are called like the apostles to work for the building up of the Kingdom of God, and doing that best by lives of loving service, forgiveness and treating others as we wish to be treated. This is rarely an easy task.

In the Holy Eucharist, the Lord offers us again the opportunity to work with God in the promotion of divine love and goodness in the world. The offering of simple gifts of bread and wine recounts the gift of God who took on our humanity that we might partake of divinity.

Our God understands and helps us. May the regular celebration of the mysteries of our faith fill us with zeal to be real instruments of change in the world in making known the Kingdom of God being offered without cost to each and all for the life of the world.