

### 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Giving Jesus First Place*

1<sup>st</sup> Reading: 2 Kgs 4:4-11, 14-16a

Psalm 69

2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Rom 6:3-4, 8-11

Gospel: Mt 10:37-42

In today's Gospel, Jesus lays down the condition for being his disciple. He demands total dedication of those who would be his followers. The disciple must be prepared to have greater loyalty to Jesus than to any member of his own family. He says, "*Whoever loves father or mother...son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*"

Jesus is able to make such a demand because he is God incarnate. God wants us to love our parents and children. The fourth commandment says, "*Honor your father and your mother*" (Mt 19:19). But should parents ever try to come between their children and Jesus, their first allegiance must be Jesus.

In him we have the kingdom of God and eternal life. He is even more important than our parents and our children. "*I am the way, the truth and the life,*" he said, "*No one comes to the Father except through me*" (Jn 14:6). Jesus is our only way to heaven and eternal life. He must come before all others. We must remain connected to him through total allegiance; we cannot afford to allow anyone to come between him and us. He is one with the Father (Jn 10:30) in sustaining us in both natural and supernatural life. To be worthy of Jesus, our hearts must be attached primarily to him.

All of this is for our great good. Jesus is far more valuable to us than mere mortals. "*For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily,*" and through maintaining unity with him through an absolute allegiance, we "*share in this fullness in him*" (Col 2:9-10). Unlike mere human beings, Jesus, the God-man, conquered death; and now the fullness of the divinity resides in him; even his human flesh has been divinized, and "*from his fullness we have all received*" (Jn 1:16). This is the Jesus we receive in the Eucharist. "*Whoever eats this bread will live forever*" (Jn 6:51). He is our sole source of immortality.

It is imperative that we remain faithful to Jesus at all costs "*so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God*" (Eph 3:19).

Since Jesus is God, when we love him above all others, we are fulfilling the first and greatest commandment to love God with our whole heart. (See Mt 22:36-38.)

But it is not as if our families and others will be cut off from our love if we love God. The contrary is true. God commands us to love family and neighbor—but in right order. Jesus teaches us true love. Not even these loves should be put before the love of God, which must always be given an overriding priority.

However, all other earthly loves are enriched, purified and encouraged to grow when we love God. Our heart expands and our capacity for loving increases. We find ourselves able to overcome all the obstacles and limitations of self-centeredness that are present in all of us. The pure loves of this life are raised and ennobled still more when we love God first and most of all. (See *In Conversation with God*.)

Jesus continued to teach his disciples: "*and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.*" To take up one's cross and to follow after Jesus, means that we have decided to be crucified with Jesus. St. Paul understood the necessity of the cross in the disciple's life when he said, "*Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires*" (Gal 5:24). We must crucify or put to death our disordered passions and desires whenever they assert themselves and try to come between Jesus and us. We must deny all disordered self-love that would usurp Jesus' first place.

This need to crucify or put to death our sinful passions and desires helps us to understand today's second reading.

"*We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.*" Baptism gives us a radical power to die with Jesus, that is, to put to death the evil desires that spring from our sinfully inclined human nature. This ascetical practice will free us to be able to live a new life, the life of grace, the life of Christ. If we fulfill our

baptismal commitment to *"reject sin...[and] the glamour of evil, ...refuse to be mastered by sin...[and] Satan"* himself, we will *"live in the freedom of God's children"*. (See baptismal promises.)

In this light, we can better understand the words in today's epistle, *"we were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him."*

In other words crucifixion leads to resurrection. If we can rid ourselves of the old sinful behavior, we will begin to live a new, better, happier life—a superior life, the life of Jesus. With St. Paul we will be able to say, *"Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me"* (Gal 2:20).

We seek to make this death to sin a permanent reality, like Jesus died to his earthly life. *"As to his death, he died to sin [that is, for our sins] once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as dead to sin, and living for God in Christ Jesus."*

Returning to our Gospel text for today, Jesus says, *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* In other words, life seen as mere self-centered, earthly existence and lived in denial of Jesus and his gospel, ends in self-destruction; but when lived in loyalty to Christ, despite earthly death, one arrives at the fullness of life. Loss of earthly life for Jesus' sake will be rewarded by everlasting life in the kingdom.

He who refuses to die for Jesus and thus prolong his earthly life for a few years, will lose his eternal life; he who accepts death for Jesus' sake will gain eternal life.

Implied in all of this is that following Jesus is a constant challenge. To follow Jesus and his gospel calls for death to selfish, self-centered living. But self-renunciation gives birth to a "new self" (Eph 4:24), a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), through which we *"share in the glorious freedom of the children of God"* (Rom 8:21).

Jesus tells us in the Gospel today, *"Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."* Receiving a disciple of Jesus is to receive Jesus himself. To the extent we receive them and their message, we receive Jesus himself. And in receiving Jesus in them, we receive God himself.

Such an attitude of faith connects us to God. In this way, we open ourselves to the spiritual riches of the kingdom of God. God gives himself to us; we enter into communion with him. We experience the bliss of allowing him to rule our hearts; his heavenly reign becomes a reality in us as his kingdom becomes ever more firmly established in us.

Jesus says, *"Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward..."* In return to a childless couple for hospitality shown him, the prophet Elisha told the "woman of influence", *"This time next year you will be fondling a baby son."* And we are told in the following verse, *"the woman conceived, and by the same time the following year she had given birth to a son, as Elisha had promised"*. Abraham also was given Isaac in return for the hospitality he extended to God in the guise of three visitors (Gen 18). These extraordinary rewards demonstrate to us the outstanding spiritual benefits the selfless love shown to others, especially Jesus' disciples, through simple acts of hospitality welcoming them. Do you receive your priest and other ministers of the Gospel in that way? Remember, a prophet is one who speaks in the name of God.

The Gospel of today continues, *"And whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward."* A righteous person is one who is right with God, one who believes and whose person is flooded with divine grace and the radiance of the divine presence. We can readily see that such a righteous person who is in the state of sanctifying grace is a worthy dwelling for God who comes to visit us through his servants. When we receive such a person, we are rewarded with a visit of God himself and the spiritual riches we receive as we enter into communion with the living God through such a righteous person.

The passage in today's Gospel concludes with Jesus' words, *"And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple—Amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."*

Any humble follower of Jesus, a little one, who is not afraid to stand up for him and is worthy of the name, deserves our hospitality. For this we will be richly rewarded. Here we recall Jesus' other words, *"Come you*

*who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."* (Mt 25:34, 40). Jesus identifies himself with his least followers. In loving and serving them, we love and serve him. He will reward us for the smallest act of service done to them and consider it as done to himself.