

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

July 14, 2024

As we all know, the Bible contains many books. For us Catholics, it's seventy-three to be exact. That's a lot of books. And not-surprisingly, these books contain many different types of writings - poetry, allegory, quasi-history, myth, narrative, and the like. That's why we can't simply use the same "tools" to interpret every book or passage of the Bible.

We have to first know what type of literature we are dealing with. And that also explains why many of us seem to "like" certain parts of the Bible more than others just like the way we don't all peruse the same shelves when we are in the library.

Today's Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is one of those passages that displays a type of writing we only occasionally see outside of the Book of Psalms. And when we encounter passages such as these, they have a tendency to really stand out.

St. Paul, at the beginning of this particular letter, is doing what he almost always does when he begins writing. He gives thanks to God and offers some words of praise. But in this particular passage, he really goes "all out" offering an introduction that reads more like a kind of hymn, a long passage of beautiful, poetic language.

Of course, St. Paul manages to inject his "theology" throughout these lines, but the effect is much different. The effect seems to be more inspirational than catechetical, for these words can make any believer's heart soar.

St. Paul tells his readers (that's you and me) that God has:

**" . . . blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing
in the heavens . . . (and) chose us in him . . . (and in love)
destined us for adoption . . . (and that) in him we have redemption
(and) forgiveness (and) the riches of his grace."**

What a God we have! Who wouldn't want to be part of that? Who wouldn't want to share in all that God seems to be offering? Who wouldn't want to follow this Jesus if this is the result, the outcome, the "reward" for putting our trust in him?

So what's the catch?

I use the word "catch" to get your attention, for that word sounds so beneath the majesty of God. And it is, for the word "catch" implies that something is "too good to be true" or that our God is somehow deceiving us in some way. Which is never and can't be the case. Nothing could be further from the truth. And yet, we would be foolish to assume that following Jesus "costs" us nothing. After all, being faithful to the Father and being true to himself, cost Jesus everything.

The other two readings of today show one of the real natural consequences of living a life of faith, one of the expectations, one of the costs, one of the "catches" if you will. In the First Reading we see the Prophet Amos being kicked out of the northern Kingdom of Israel after saying some tough but truthful things to the people there. He had left his home in the south (Judah) and had gone north to try to fulfill his prophetic calling. He knew it wouldn't be easy. He knew it might put him in danger. And yet (courageously), he went anyway, showing a level of commitment to doing the right thing, a level which many of us hardly show.

And in the Gospel we see the Lord Jesus sending out the Twelve two by two, instructing them to go town to town healing, and preaching, and driving out demons. And he lays out some strict "ground rules" for them, rules which show that they will have to have a singular purpose, and indeed a singular focus.

Following Jesus wasn't simply about listening to him and thinking, "This is a great guy." No, believing in him and trusting in him came with a high cost. It meant that they would need to speak a certain way, and see the world in a certain way, and think a certain way, and act a certain way, that

is, in a very real sense, LIVE a certain way and for a certain purpose no matter what the cost. That's the real challenge for us in this time and place. Do we want all the "good stuff" such as we heard about so beautifully in the Second Reading without it demanding anything from us? Do we want blessings without any real commitment, without any expectations? Do we want the easiest path, the safest path, the one that costs us little if anything?

My dear friends, I guess it depends on how we see our faith. If we see it as a kind of a "burden", why would we want to do anything but the "minimum"? Why would we want to share it with others? Why would we go the extra mile, or wear it on our sleeves, risking ridicule or hostility? Why in the world would we want to imitate people like the Prophet Amos or the Twelve or countless others down through the centuries?

But if we see it as a gift . . . as the most precious of gifts . . . why WOULDN'T we want to do for our God who loves us beyond our wildest imagination? Why wouldn't we want to share it with everyone we meet? Why wouldn't we want it to shape our every thought and attitude and action? In other words, why wouldn't we want to give what Jesus gave - our entire selves?

My dear friends, we don't have to earn God's love or forgiveness or the salvation he offers. But if we truly believe in all that he has done for us, if we believe in all that his Son said and did, if we believe in the price he paid

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What are we willing to pay? What are we willing to give? Where are we willing to go?