

Acceptance of Joy

8/31/2014

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

What do we seek in our life? What makes life worth living? Is it our happiness, is it peace we seek? Most of us would probably say yes; that if my life consisted of peace and happiness, that is enough for me! But a better way of answering the question of life is that we ultimately seek joy, and finding joy gives me the happiness and peace I want. Now according to (HN), joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death - can take that love away. Joy is a spiritual reality much larger than myself that allows me to live the inevitable pain of life with hope. A life directed toward joy is a choice we make, a choice based ultimately on faith. A faith that lifts us up so that every moment of life brings us joy even if that moment is one of pain. It depends on how we look at the moment and how we seek that joy. This is what our readings today are telling us. What we find in them is that seeking God's will for us and submitting ourselves to God's will gives us the purpose for living.

Jeremiah surely did not like proclaiming God's will to the people because it was leading him to anguish, sorrow and abuse by the powers that be in Israel at the time; but he chose God's will. In Romans Paul tells us to not follow the way of contemporary society but to seek and discern what is God's will, to discern what is good and pleasing and perfect in God's eyes. And finally Jesus tells us not to take the easy way in our pursuit of happiness but to follow him by taking up our cross. To take up our cross? Isn't that the opposite way from happiness and peace? That's what Jeremiah thought. That's certainly what Peter thought and he told Jesus that! God forbid that we go the way of the cross, the way of shame and defeat. That's what contemporary society saw in the cross. But God's will is not our will. The cross is a symbol of death and life, of suffering and joy, of defeat and victory. Look at the cross.... what does your Christian heart tell you? That the way of the cross is the way of faith, the way of hope, and the way of love. That it's the way of our Lord and Savior and he invites us to make it our way. He tells us to look at our cross with the eyes of our heart. But at first we don't see the good. We see our cross just lying there before us representing all our good intentions unfulfilled, our failures, our pain, our evil intentions that fester there. It feels repugnant, it feels shameful, and we don't want to have anything to do with it. We just want that cross to go away even though we know it won't. Our cross has become an obstacle, a barrier in the way God has chosen for us to fulfill our lives. So we turn from it, run away on another path, one of our own choosing, one more acceptable to our vision of happiness and peace. But the way God has chosen is the way of true peace, happiness, and joy. We have a choice, God's way or my way. And we hear again Jesus telling us: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

A Christian cannot ignore these words of Jesus. He has to risk, to gamble this present life in order to attain eternal life. It is a battle of wills, so to speak, my will vs God's will; which one will govern my actions and thus the living of my life? Our Lord is telling us that we must deny our own will in order to identify with the will of God. St. John of the Cross also comments on these words:

“We don’t want to manipulate God as do those many people who would have God will that which they themselves will and are fretful at having to will that which He wills, and find it repugnant to accommodate their will to that of God. Hence it happens to them that oftentimes they think that that in which they find not their own will and pleasure is not the will of God; and that, on the other hand, when they find satisfaction, God is satisfied. Thus they measure God by themselves and not themselves by God acting quite contrarily to that which Jesus taught in the Gospel”. In other words these people, maybe us, try to construct a God that agrees with what they do and think so that they don’t have to conform to the real God. But if we want to follow the real God, the God who is love and has predestined us for success in our life, how do we respond? First by faith and taking the risk of picking up our cross; also by listening to the Church which gives us the Bible and the wisdom contained in our Sacred Tradition; ,where the Holy Spirit guides the Church and each one of us in the way of Jesus. And finally we respond by prayer, prayer of the heart which addresses God who has taken up his dwelling within us.

Faith means that we completely submit our intellect and will to God. With our whole being we give our assent to God the revealer. So our faith is our yes to God in the same sense that our Blessed Mother gave her yes.

The Church is the concrete expression of God’s will for us whereby through the Sacraments, God’s grace of strength and consolation through the Holy Spirit are available to us. These give us the courage to take the risk of taking up our cross.

Prayer is our means of communication with God in a heartfelt way. (HN) In addition to our sometimes fruitless prayer of the intellect, there is prayer of the heart. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, heart refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional and moral energies. Thus the heart is the central or unifying organ of our personal life. Prayer of the heart is a prayer that directs itself to God from the center of our person and thus affects the whole of our humanness. This type of prayer is profound yet simple.

[One night while babysitting, a grandfather passed his granddaughter’s room and overheard her repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent fashion. “what on earth are you up to?”

I’m saying my prayers, but I can’t think of exactly the right words tonight, so I am saying all the letters. God will put them together for me because He knows what I am thinking.]

Prayer of the heart is really a meditation which involves mostly listening rather than speaking and is initiated by short simple prayers (Lord Jesus have mercy upon me a sinner), it is unceasing and it is all inclusive. It comes to a point where the burden of our cross, even if it encompasses all the worries of the world, is bearable. It is where Jesus tells us: “Come to me all who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light”. It is thus that we find our joy with its peace and happiness.