

Jesus' statements in today's Gospel are shocking, if we take them seriously, as we should. He asks us to give him the first place in life, in our affections and our actions, above those closest and dearest to us. If such an extreme call confronts or even horrifies us, then we should read on and take with similar seriousness what Jesus goes on to say: that someone who receives a disciple receives Jesus himself. Jesus is identifying himself with his disciples in a very real way. We are not just Jesus' disciples. We are bearers of Christ. More than that, the Fathers of the Church would say, we're Christs. In the words of St Paul in today's second reading, if we have died with Christ, then we believe that we shall also live with him, and indeed, we should think of ourselves as living *in* him, right now. This is why he can ask to be placed above mother and father, son and daughter, and even our own soul: because he *is* our life.

But of course, this is easy to say, and hard to live. From day to day we put God below not just the *people* we love and hold dear, but even the *things* we love and hold dear. There are so many ways in which, every day, we fail to take up our cross and follow Christ. Without being overly harsh on ourselves, it is quite true that we are, on our own, unworthy of Christ.

But admitting this should not lead us to despair or resignation to an inevitable failure. Because we're made worthy not by ourselves and our own strength, but by God who is far more powerful than our sins, God, who chooses us to be sons of light. He makes us worthy of Christ by *his* choice, not ours. In baptism, as St Paul says, we are united to Christ's death. In baptism, we begin to fulfil Christ's call to lose our life for his sake, and become united to Christ and live Christ's life in charity. Even if we lose our union of charity with Christ through our sins, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Christ heals us of our sins and restores that bond of charity with him. Every time we come to Mass, we join Christ as he offers himself to the Father as the one perfect sacrifice, a sacrifice that brings

about genuine reconciliation between us and God. And to the extent that we are united to him in charity, we too are offered with him to the Father. When we receive the Eucharist, he enters us and transforms us from within so that we are drawn deeper and deeper into that unity of charity with him.

And what begins at the altar is meant to extend out into the world. In today's prayer over the offerings, we pray that our deeds may be worthy of God's sacred gifts, offered and received on this altar. If Jesus identifies himself with us, to the extent that he took on human nature, he identifies himself with every human being, and particularly with human beings in material or spiritual need. One of the key differences that Christianity made to the Greco-Roman world was to change how they thought about and dealt with the poor. Charity was not alien to the ancient world, but it was limited only to people like them. If you weren't a citizen of Rome, but a slave or a foreigner, you didn't deserve any part of the service of the wealthy of Rome. Christians became known in the third and fourth centuries because they extended charity not just to their fellow citizens, but to slaves and foreigners, and to the vast masses of the faceless poor which ordinary society ignored as unimportant. There are still many kinds of injustice and need which remain invisible to our own society, because they are too far away from us (like the bombing of Yemen), or because we think they are someone else's or the government's problem (such as the poor in our own streets), or even because our own comfort and wealth is based on their exploitation (the working conditions of those who make our iPhones or our clothes). Just as the pagan Romans limited their charity to their fellow citizens, we too are blind to people's need according to our politics. In some circles, it is impolite to mention that, maybe the problem with police brutality or racism is not just an American issue. In other circles, it can be problematic to point out that our society systematically regards several categories of people as disposable: the unborn, the elderly, the disabled. As Christians, we are called to

take up our cross and follow Jesus, by reaching out to all human beings in need, by showing them that God cares for them and loves them. This is how we can put Christ first in our lives, by allowing him to change us in the sacraments, letting him open our eyes to see him and his need in the world around us, and living as those transformed by the love of Christ poured into our lives by channeling Christ's love to everyone we meet.

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