

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Vocations Discernment Retreat; St. Mary's Roland Park

Saturday, 1st Week in Ordinary Time

Vocations Discernment Retreat

St. Mary's Roland Park

Jan. 19, 2019

One summer, when I was in college seminary, my parents and I were visiting relatives in the Detroit metro area. Since it was Sunday, we went to the local parish. I thought it would be just a “routine” Sunday Mass. And having been a seminarian for a few years, I felt that I was already on my way to becoming an “expert” in religious matters.

The priest who offered Mass was short in stature, he wore very ordinary vestments, and had a soft speaking voice. When he went into the pulpit, I wasn't expecting fireworks and, if truth be told, he really wasn't much of an orator. But to my surprise, his words stung me to the heart. The Gospel for that Sunday was the Beatitudes and the way he spoke of them caused me to discern the depth and quality of my relationship with Jesus Christ. Was the Lord really at the center of my life? Was I anything like the Christ of the Beatitudes - poor in spirit, humble, a peacemaker, a lover of holiness, clean of heart, ready to suffer for my faith - or was I becoming a religious technocrat? His words, simple but from the heart, were a moment of conversion for me. How could I aspire to be a priest without making Christ the center of my life?

The Letter to the Hebrews

Pope Francis speaks often of “a God of surprises” - and that Sunday I was surprised when through that priest the Lord penetrated the fog and spoke directly to my heart. And I thought of that experience yet again when I prayed over today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews - a reading which, by the way, is perfect for a discernment retreat. For it tells us that God’s Word can cut right to the heart - it tells us that God’s Word is ‘able to discern the reflections & thoughts of our hearts.’

Because God is love, his word to us is always a word of love. Because God is glorious in his truth, his word always illumines our hearts. St. John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus, ‘the light of the world,’ is the true light that illumines the heart of every person. In his Gospel we also read that Jesus’ words are words of “spirit and life”. So if we open our hearts to God in prayer, we can expect that the Lord will shed his light on what is going on in our hearts, and, as you and I know, our hearts can be pretty complicated. We can expect that God’s Word will help us discern the good that we should embrace and the evil that we should reject. God’s Word, as I found out so long ago, also challenges us to discern the depth and quality of our relationship with Jesus.

But we can also expect that God’s Word will help us discern what it is the Lord is asking us to do with our lives. In what specific way is the Lord calling us to follow him? What form will our baptismal calling to love God and neighbor take? You are here because at various levels, God’s Word has already touched your heart and prompted you to discern whether God might be calling you to serve Him and his Church as a priest. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, you may be striving to understand better what a call to the priesthood involves and to understand better the attraction you may feel to this way of life. And, if you’re like me, you may be grappling with the subtle ways we sometimes try to wiggle out from under God’s Word of love and truth. Sometimes our excuses for evading God’s will are disguised

as sound reasoning. God's Word helps us to dispense with excuses and to test our reasoning. There's never a time in life when we don't need to discern God's will but sometimes the Spirit makes God's will immediately apparent to us, if we're open! All that said, your openness to the Lord's call brings me a lot of joy.

A High Priest Able to Sympathize

Of course, we may think to ourselves, at least I do sometimes, why doesn't the Lord just make it plain; why doesn't he just tell us what he wants? Again, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us a lot about Jesus the High Priest. When Jesus, God's Son, became one of us — taking upon himself the limitations and weakness of our humanity, he too had to discern the will of the Father. That's why Jesus often withdrew from the crowds to pray. Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, the great High Priest, is able to sympathize with us in our weakness because he too was tested in every way that we are tested - except that Jesus never sinned and always embraced his Father's will.

The Call of Levi

In the Gospel we see how God's Word struck home in the heart of a tax collector, a tax collector named Levi but elsewhere in the Gospels identified as Matthew. Matthew, let us be clear, was a tax collector. Then as now tax collectors were not particularly popular, but in Jesus' day they were despised because they took money from the Israelites, many of them poor, and gave it to the all-powerful Roman Empire which was occupying their land. Tax collectors were also often thought to engage in fraud and extortion.

Passing by Matthew's customs post, Jesus says, almost offhandedly, "Follow me!" The look of Jesus and his words must have stung him to the heart. The Gospel reading tells us that Matthew immediately got up, he "rose" up, and from that time

on began to follow Jesus. Perhaps Matthew previously had heard Jesus preach or witnessed a miracle. Whatever it was, his words, “Follow me!” had an immediate effect on Matthew. They led to a radical transformation of his life.

To say the least, Jesus’ choice of a tax collector was controversial. The religious experts of the day made it clear that Jesus had chosen a sinner, and more than that, had come to the house of a sinner for dinner where he shared the company of other sinners. Challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus simply said that he came to call sinners. Sick people need the physician not the healthy.

I always find it consoling that Jesus chose Matthew to be an apostle, because it gives me hope that despite my own weakness I too can be Jesus’ follower. I hope the story of St. Matthew’s calling also hits home with you. One of the excuses for not answering a call to the priesthood can be, “Lord I am not worthy!” - And none of us is worthy to be a priest. But if we track what happened after Matthew was called by the Lord, we see that he and the other apostles were carefully formed by Jesus, as if they were enrolled in a kind of seminary. The apostles became his companions; they listened to his words in public and private; they questioned him; they made mistakes; they were sometimes afraid; they sometimes misunderstood Jesus; and even deserted him in his hour of need. Yet, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ words of “spirit and life” struck home. They were formed to be high priests after the mind and heart of the great High Priest.

In these days, may you also hear and welcome into your hearts the Lord’s words of “spirit and life”!