

- Last Sunday I spoke of how imperative it is that we listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow Him into His sheepfold.
- For if we wish to be saved, then we must remain with our Lord by remaining within the safe pastures of His Body, the Church. It's the only way to be a true and total follower of Jesus Christ. It's the only way to be a disciple
- Moreover, discipleship is something that we accept according to our Lord's own terms. We do not get to set the terms of discipleship; we do not get to make up the rules of how we will live out our Christian faith, for the Faith is something we receive, not something we create.
- And so, what are the terms of authentic Christian discipleship? How do we know if we are truly followers of Christ? That's the issue taken up by our readings today.
- In our first reading we hear the story of the newly-converted Saul, soon-to-be-known as Paul. We hear that the Christian community in Jerusalem is wary of Saul, fearful that he might be seeking to infiltrate their community so as to betray them to the authorities.
- We read that the proof of Paul's authenticity as a disciple of Christ is that he has spoken out boldly in Christ's name.
- What we glean from this is that Paul was willing to speak the truth of the Gospel, even when doing so was unpopular and put him at risk. In other words, St. Paul proved that he was willing to undergo persecution and suffering for the sake of the Gospel.
- Think of what Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes: *Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Matt. 5:10-12)
- So, the willingness to suffer for the sake of the Faith is one of the hallmarks of a true disciple. Of course, we shouldn't go out preaching the Faith in such a way as to provoke.
- Being strident and offensive in our speech isn't what Jesus asks of us. We are told by Paul himself in his Letter to the Ephesians to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).
- Yet, those who are enemies of the Cross of Christ and of His Church very often cannot bear the truth spoken to them, even when done with love. Truth can be like a dagger to the heart to the one who has his heart set on something else.
- Yet, our love for others must be such that we are willing to say what needs to be said to them, and to do so with love. And our love for Christ must be such that we are willing to suffer at the hands of others for preaching the Gospel, just as He did.
- In our second reading we read from St. John the admonition: "Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth."
- So here, St. John tells us that discipleship also requires keeping our Lord's commandments and doing what pleases Him, and that God's commandment is that "we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as He commanded us."
- St. Teresa of Ávila once said quite bluntly: "words are easy but deeds are hard."
- And she's absolutely right. It's one thing to profess the Faith and to say that we will be obedient to our Lord's commandments; it's another thing to live out the Faith and to *be* obedient!

- It's not that difficult to intellectually assent to the Faith and to call ourselves Christians. It's much more difficult to put that faith into action and to practice the virtue of charity.
- Yet, our Lord is quite clear in Matthew 25, when He speaks of separating the sheep from the goats that, how well we perform works of charity, how well we put our faith into action, will be part of the discussion He has with us on Judgment Day.
- Remember what Jesus said in His parable? To the "sheep" who performed the corporal works of mercy He said: *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.'*
- But to the goats who failed to perform the corporal works of mercy He said: *'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.... 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'*
- Clearly, we cannot be true disciples, nor can we hope for salvation, if we aren't charitable.
- Furthermore, St. John is clear that obedience to our Lord's commandments is a form of love for Him and proof of our discipleship. And it makes sense, doesn't it? For can we say that we believe that Jesus is Lord and *not* obey what He teaches us through His Church?
- Lastly, as we look at the Gospel we are commanded to remain in Christ as a branch on a vine, and Jesus speaks of the fruit we must bear if we are not be cut off and burned. Jesus is speaking, of course, of the fruits of virtue – of holiness. Virtue is proof of discipleship.
- So often when we fail in virtue, we give ourselves a pass, saying things like: "well, I'm only human." And, of course, it's true that, as humans, we are weak and have a propensity to sin. Yet, real virtue *is* possible!
- And not only is it possible for us to cultivate virtue within ourselves, it is a necessity for Christian discipleship! As disciples of Christ, we must resemble Christ by our holiness.
- And the stakes are high, for Jesus tells us in this Gospel that if we refuse to bear good fruit by remaining in Him, we will be thrown out and burned. This is the danger of spiritual tepidity and lukewarmness. If we are lukewarm, God will spew us out of His mouth (Rev 3:16)!
- So, we learn from our readings today that we can know we are authentic disciples of Christ if we are willing to suffer for the Faith, if we are obedient to the teachings of the Church and practice works of charity, and if we are striving to grow in virtue and holiness.
- Frankly, being a true disciple in these ways can be daunting, especially given the pressures of the world to live otherwise.
- Yet, Jesus tells us in the Gospel today that, while there will be times when we will be pruned, if we remain in Him – which we do through prayer and the worthy reception of the Sacraments – we will bear fruit, and He will do whatever we ask of Him.
- In other words, Christ will make us His true and fruitful disciples if we just turn to Him. He will strengthen us to rise to the demands of discipleship if we unite ourselves to Him!
- Brothers and sisters, our world is clearly in need of more authentic Christian disciples. Our world needs fearless preachers who aren't afraid to suffer, and virtuous and obedient souls who practice works of charity. We need prayerful men and women who are united to Christ.
- And being these things is our call and our duty, and it will be our glory in Heaven.
- May each of us be willing to undergo whatever pruning the Lord wishes to carry out in us.
- And through our daily prayer and reception of the Sacraments, may we be strengthened to be authentic disciples of Christ: for His glory, for the salvation of others, and for our own salvation. St. Paul, pray for us. St. John the Evangelist, pray for us.