

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, May 24th 2014

“You do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world.” What does Jesus mean when he tells us we do not “belong to the world?” Look around – don’t we seem to belong here? We breathe, we move, we have our being in this world. The world impacts us, and we impact it. We are physical, not ephemeral. How can someone be “in” but not “belong” to this world? I returned last night from a trip to Washington, DC. I have been traveling to that city for much of the last 30 years as a volunteer for the tax accounting profession. The first few times I journeyed there I felt disoriented. Omaha was smaller, less pretentious, perhaps safer, more predictable, and certainly more familiar than was the District. But after a few trips I noticed that I could pick out landmarks and had memories of new places. My anxiousness about being outside my regular orientation quickly become comfort in a place not so unfamiliar as it once was. If you think about the times you may have traveled, or changed schools or jobs or parishes or family relationships, you might agree that we go through stages – from comfort with the “orientation” we have to our existing condition, to one of “disorientation” when challenged to make changes, and then (hopefully) to one of “re-orientation” to our new reality. Depending on how hard we cling to our prior orientation, we can experience mild or significant discomfort in moving to our new orientation. Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, once said “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” When I reflect today on this passage, it seems to me we could characterize Christ (as well as any of the real prophets) as a “re-orienter.” For many of us, Christ is THE greatest re-orienter. He is showing us the way to fully embrace our spiritual side! We are oriented to this world. We are comfortable in it. We use our senses to enjoy the world, to feel pain, to console, to celebrate, to be in this state of being in which we find ourselves. For many of us, this is the only reality we know or care to know. But Christ first “dis-oriens” us by challenging us to view our world and our relationships in a different way. He calls into question the wisdom of his age and reinterprets that knowledge to illustrate a new way of living, of interacting with our fellow travelers through this physical life. He asks us to voluntarily move from one orientation to another, and to prepare for our ultimate “re-orientation” at death. He calls us to a radical love – one that is other-directed, not self-directed, and one that manifests itself in keeping our current physical orientation in the proper perspective relative to our future “re-orientation” in a spiritual state. Christ doesn’t leave us in a state of “dis-orientation” but invites us to follow a path to “re-orientation” and, hopefully, as a result of following that path, to a new sense of orientation. I think saints get this (duh!) better than the rest of us. Think of Francis of Assisi, or Ignatius, or Mother Teresa. This world for them was much less important than their future orientation. They were able to detach themselves from the strong physical pulls of our worldly state of being and prepare themselves for their new spiritual (re) orientation. Their understanding of detachment from the pleasurable enticements of this existence, modeled on that of Jesus, drove them to live with one foot in the next world while they were still planted in this. So if we follow the path Jesus invites us to travel with him, shouldn’t we act as if this world is temporary, and that what we have is transitory, and that ALL the possessions, the wealth we have, including life itself, are not owned by us but instead are borrowed from the Creator? If all of what we “have” is borrowed, shouldn’t we use those possessions as the Lendor intends, not as we wish? If we desire to do this, then won’t we help, not harm, the weak? Won’t we seek to give rather than receive? Won’t we share rather than hoard? If we follow Jesus on this invited path, when the time comes for our temporary orientation in this world to end, won’t it be easier to transition from here to hereafter and to embrace with joy the experience we will have in re-orienting ourselves into the spiritual world to which we eternally belong? And so my prayer today is for the grace to cooperate wholeheartedly with Jesus in following the path

he suggests for re-orienting my life.

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