

Easter V (5 May 2024)

“VERILY, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.

+In the Name...

Americans like easy! If we can cut a corner, we do so. When my grandmother got her first teaching job, every teacher had a piano in her classroom because every teacher played the piano. But why learn to play when you can have music on your phone? When I bought my first car, my father taught me how to change the oil on it. Of course, that car is long gone, at least from my life, but I cannot tell you the last time I changed the oil in any car.

Young people do not like China or crystal because why go to the trouble of a fancy dinner? Let's go out! Grocery stores reflect these trends too: the bakery is filled with beautiful baked goods, but one

can often hear crickets on the baking aisle. You have your own additions for this list, no doubt.

So, this Gospel sounds perfect for us average Americans. Why eat healthy and exercise when I can take a pill? Why put in effort when there is a shortcut? Why spend years honing a skill that I can pay someone else to do? Why do it myself when I can just ask God for it?! I know I have used this example before, but it is a good one so here goes: I immediately thought of the young George Bailey in It's a Wonderful Life: he walks into the drug store where he is employed and makes a wish on the lamp lighting machine. (I haven't a clue what it is really called.) "I wish I had a million dollars" crows George. The lamp lights. "Hot dog!" exudes George, as if the small flame was a forgone conclusion.

So why don't we all just ask God for a million dollars?! Isn't that what this Gospel is telling us? I do not recall any ifs, and or buts. Let's read it again: "VERILY, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.

Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.” That sounds like a carte blanche to ask for whatever I want – kind of like a small child at Christmas in the biggest toy store he can imagine with St. Nicholas standing over him with the promise of anything and everything he wants.

Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but you knew it could not be as simple as that. Whether because you know after years of careful theological study that Christ does not work that way, or because you knew it just could not be that simple. Christ does indeed promise to give us what we ask, but this is no Aladdin and the magic lamp. Or maybe there are similarities... If memory serves, there are restrictions from the Genie like not wishing for death for someone, or of course, the exclusion of wishing for more wishes. Here the unspoken limitation included by Christ is that what we are praying for has to be according to His will. Think of that prayer you learned before you even knew what a prayer was:

“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.” But then comes the very fair question of, “Okay, Father, but how do I know what God’s will for me is?”

Well, let me give you an example of a way, perhaps, not to approach that question: a woman phoned the church recently wanting advice on how to discern God’s will in her life.

Specifically, she said that God had given her the gift of being able to see the future, but she was not sure how God wanted her to use the information He was providing her. I suggested that she share the winning lottery numbers with her favorite vicar, but she said that was not the kind of information with which she was provided.

So, I asked for an example. She said that she saw her dad’s death before he was diagnosed with a terminal disease. I suggested that maybe it was so she could spend more time with her dad while he was still living, but she said she did not do that because she did not believe the vision. So, she asked me what she could do to help learn God’s will in her life. I asked if she was part of a

congregation and she said no. I recommended that she find one and get involved: attend worship services, receive the sacraments, and read Holy Scripture. No, she was not interested in those sorts of things, she explained to me. She was not a religious person, but she was spiritual. “So why are you calling me?” I asked. “Well, I know Catholics (her word, not mine) are into this sort of thing!” I was flabbergasted! Here this woman knew that the Church had the answers she was seeking but did not want to pursue it. I have conversations similar to this one fairly frequently. This caller was more direct, but inquirers are often hoping for a quick prayer, a blessing, some ask for Communion, some for exorcisms, hoping that all their problems will be over. My advice is always the same: take your spiritual life seriously: put in the time and effort.

So here is an idea: the summer Olympics will be in France this year. When I was in graduate school, I enjoyed rowing on the crew team. Let’s put a Parish of St. Mark team together to compete this summer in Paris. Why not? Well besides the more

obvious reasons, it is not how it's done: one prepares for years, practicing, exercising, eating right, qualifying; I do not know all the steps because I never competed anywhere near that level. I would never expect to be a successful Olympic athlete without training and preparation, yet some would be tempted to think the spiritual life should be that easy.

Think of the plants we are going to bless at the end of this Mass. I am not gardener, but I know that I cannot take my plant home this afternoon and throw it in a closet, ignore it, and expect it to blossom and grow. I shall have to water it, fertilize it, make sure it gets sunlight, and remove the dead blossoms and leaves. And I cannot just check in on my plant once a week and compress all that attention into one hour and then shove it back in the closet until the appointed time the next week. Yet some Christians hope for that exact scenario: if I just show up to church once a week for an hour, God will know that I am a good guy, and He will shower me with blessings. God knows everything about us regardless of

where we are, but if the only time we give Him is the one hour church service on Sunday, we are expecting too much for too little.

Yes, God will give us what we ask, in so far that it is according to His will. But this is an instance when we will have to fight against our natural impulses to want to take the easy way out, against our expectations for instant gratification. But do not get me wrong: this Gospel reading does NOT tell us not to ask, but it tells us to ask for more. We do not ask too much but too little. But with those requests come great responsibility. We are not talking after all, just about growing plants or even qualifying for the Olympic games, but the final destination of not only our immortal souls, but those around us as well.

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