

+ J. M. J.

There's a story in the Second Book of Kings. On two occasions when the King Ahaziah sends a captain with fifty men to arrest Elijah, Elijah calls down fire from heaven to consume the men. The apostles James and John probably had something similar in mind when they made their bold request to Jesus. It is slightly humorous to consider their request. They ask **"Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?"** And exactly how were these two men going to call down this fire from heaven?

As we hear this story unfold we can learn a lot about ourselves, our requests to God, and how Jesus answers our prayer. In the providence of God this whole situation is immediately followed by an encounter with three other people. Jesus' dialog with these three others centers on the question of what it means to follow him. So, what happens is this request of James and John is answered with something practical, a situation that immediately follows the original request.

St. Augustine wrote a sermon where he commented on the disposition of each of these three people. Of course Jesus can read their very hearts. In the first case Jesus makes a comparison with foxes and the birds of the sky. Foxes are cunning and whenever someone is compared to a fox it implies deceitfulness. Birds meaning a pride that leads to a self inflated worth of one's self. In any case Jesus' correction implies that this first would be disciple does not have the simplicity and single-mindedness toward Jesus that is characteristic of a disciple.

In the second case the person addressed has made no request to follow Jesus. It is Jesus who seeks this person out and commands that person to follow. At that point the person explains that he has to attend to two very good things, to bury the dead, which happens to be that person's father. We are commanded to honor our father and mother. Jesus then corrects because often we can have a view to do something that is very good, but indeed what is God's will is the highest good we can do even if it comes at the expense of some other things that appear good.

Finally the last person is willing to follow but is really more concerned about family and friends and their opinion than the actual following of Jesus. This really is in contrast to the story of Elisha who definitely leaves everything behind, giving his oxen to the people to eat.

So, to James and John the Lord reiterates his call. They were ordered out of their father's fishing boat, and Jesus asked them to follow, but Jesus demonstrates they have in their hearts a little of these other people. In their request they demonstrate they still have their own ambitions, they are not focused completely on the highest good, the will of God, and they still look back on something they have left behind. We too in some way have yet to follow completely, holding something back.

As we come forward and approach our Eucharistic table Jesus invites us to wholeheartedly follow him. We just like James and John are accustomed to bringing our requests to our Lord Jesus. Jesus' concern is our happiness, but our ultimate and final happiness lies in being with Jesus forever in heaven. That is our hope. Consequently Jesus just as he answered James and John by a concrete circumstance in their lives, we can expect that if we examine what it is that happens to us after we pray and make a request of the Lord we will discover that our prayers often are answered by the very circumstances of our lives. The response to our prayer may not be to get exactly what we want, but an invitation to let go of something so that we may follow more perfectly, that we may more expediently prepare ourselves for the kingdom of heaven.

So, at this Mass it is quite an appropriate time to offer our prayers of petition to the Lord, all those concerns of the week. As children of God and heirs we can boldly ask for anything. In doing this, though, we must listen in faith for that answer to our prayers, for God gives us often what is better than what we asked for. We hope and long for the kingdom of heaven, and we listen for what is most important, the ways in which we can follow more perfectly.

May God bless you.