

During the Kairos prison retreat weekends that you've heard me speak about so much, there comes a time during the weekend when the inmates begin to "get it". They've heard lots of talks on how to walk a Christian path, they've eaten a lot of cookies, they've sung songs until they're hoarse. So what is it they *get*? That as much as the Bible is important to read and understand, in the end following Christ goes beyond knowing your Bible. You must walk the walk. This is frankly terrifying to many of them since it means sticking their necks out. For example, in the prison, the inmates self-segregate into racial groups. It's logical. When you feel threatened, you look for family first. Absent family members, you look for people who look like you. So, whites stick with whites, blacks with blacks, browns with browns, etcetera. We teach them by word and example in the prison that Christianity is color blind. Everyone gets cookies, everyone gets hugs, everyone gets treated like they have value. We encourage them to take that same attitude on the yard. The problem is that the racial gangs don't approve. If all of the races got along, the power of the gangs and their leaders would diminish. No, they don't approve of nice words being exchanged between men of different skin color.

So, on Sunday, the last day of the Kairos retreat, we have a little ceremony for the inmates. It's called a cross ceremony. None of the men are forced to come forward, and since we invite everyone regardless of their religion, we do have certain men bow out if they're practicing Muslims or Jews. But most of the rest do come forward and as they bow their heads to have the cross placed around their neck, I say to each of them, "Christ is counting on you." They respond back, "And I am counting on Christ!" You could call this little ceremony a commissioning ceremony, and that's exactly correct.

Today is the feast of the commissioning ceremony of all time, the Ascension. Jesus himself stands before the apostles, the same man that led them these past three years, yet not quite the same man. He bears the marks of his crucifixion, which means *he should be dead*, but his body is not like ours. Most of the crowd is fully engaged, wondering what is going to happen next, but some are doubtful, skeptical. Matthew includes this little line because it's important. Following Jesus is never a walk in utter confidence. Our poor minds simply can't fully absorb it – we need reassurances all the time. So Jesus does exactly what we do in the prison. He claims his authority and commissions his apostles to go out into the world; in short, he is saying, "I am counting on you!" And as if reading

their minds, he adds the consoling phrase, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” Yes, we can count on Christ.

Do you remember your first commissioning ceremony? For me, it was Cub Scouts. My 8-year old buddies and I stood in a line and each of us held up two fingers and solemnly recited: “I (state your name) promise to do my best, to do my duty to God and my country, to help other people, and to obey the Law of the Pack.” Then we had to shake hands, using the cub scout handshake, which is a lot harder than it looks. I think that the words have changed a bit since that time, but the intent is the same. We were being taught to look beyond our little boy selves, probably for the first time, and consider ourselves part of a larger reality. It was quite a moment, and after a second of silence, the Den Leaders let us go, and we spent the next half hour running around the room like little wolf cubs, beating each other up in every conceivable way until the Moms stepped in. Ahh, the good ol’ days....

Many other commissionings followed – do you realize how frequently these pop up? Graduations, armed forces induction ceremonies, jury oaths, pledges of allegiance, oaths of office, and so on. Let’s not forget those religious vows too! Ordination, marriage, religious life, and lest we forget, our baptismal promises – the gateway to all of the others. There’s a simple purpose behind all of these commissioning ceremonies, all of these solemn agreements – they are designed to cut to the heart of things, to clearly state what is important, to remove ambiguity and uncertainty. They are designed to give us *freedom*. Now wait, you might say, how does a vow give me freedom? Doesn’t it do the exact opposite? Doesn’t it remove other choices from my life?

Consider a playground perched on top of a cliff. There are swings, slides, teeter-totters, and all sorts of climbing gyms. Beautiful views from the top of the cliff, and a two hundred foot drop to the rocks below. Oh, and no fence. Is there a parent alive that would let their child play at that playground? So now consider the same scene but this time with a beautiful and very effective fence prohibiting anyone from falling off the cliff. Most parents would have zero problems letting their child play there now – ironically, the presence of a fence has allowed the children to be free to run amok, and the parents to be free from worry.

This is the same logic behind a vow – by closing out other, perhaps dangerous options, the vow allows us to act in a completely free manner

behind the “fence” of that vow. Recent marriage studies have proven this point over and over. Couples who live together for a significant period of time prior to marriage have a much higher incidence of divorce. Why? The lack of a vow, a commitment to the other, means that neither party was completely free in the pre-marital relationship. When the vow is finally made, and both parties “relax” their vigilance, there is some serious adjustment to be made. It sometimes cannot be done. The vow has the unintended consequence of bringing truth and clarity to the couple, probably the last thing they thought was needed!

So when Jesus commissions us to go out and preach to the nations, implying that we drop our other worldly attachments, it may indeed feel like a big sacrifice of our time and aspirations. But it isn't! He is simply suggesting that we fence ourselves into a life with Christ, in full confidence that we could not possibly do any better. Does that seem outrageous? I hope not. But it is counter-cultural, isn't it? I remember having a conversation with Msgr Purcell a number of years ago, and he shared with me how much he loved being a priest. I was a bit surprised. This was during the sex abuse crisis when a Roman collar was not exactly the right thing to wear in public. It absolutely didn't matter to him. Walking with Christ within the vows of his vocation was the ultimate life choice – it brought him joy. Of course, you don't need to be a priest to walk with Christ. Any of us can, and many of us do. I know that a life without Christ would be a wasteland, a desert of unfulfilled longings, a grasping for happiness straws, a never-ending battle to get more than everyone else. What an utter waste of time!

So I invite you today to ponder the commission that Christ gives to each of us – he is most certainly counting on you! Yoke yourself to Jesus – he will do his share (if not more) and he promises that the burden will be light. What doesn't get said enough is that sharing life with Christ beside you is the best place you can be. It's not a burden at all – it's a privilege and a joy. You can count on it.