Formation and Spirituality
Faith in Action: "By Their Fruits You Will Know Them"
From "Come and See" to a Life Formed by Christ
By Fr Julian Belich

Last month we reflected on the invitation that Philip gave to Nathanael:

"Come and see."
(John 1:46, RSV-CE)

Philip had encountered Jesus and he wanted Nathanael to meet him too. Nathanael was not immediately convinced. Yet Philip did not argue, pressure him or try to answer every question. He simply gave an invitation: "Come and see."

That is a good invitation for the Knights of the Southern Cross.

Come and see our prayer.
Come and see our friendship.
Come and see our service.
Come and see Catholic men trying to live their faith.
Come and see an Order that supports the Church, our clergy, parishes, families and those in need.

Last month we reflected on the invitation. This month we naturally take the next step:

"When someone comes and sees the Knights, what will he see?"

Jesus says:

"Thus you will know them by their fruits."
(Matthew 7:20, RSV-CE)

The Greek word for "fruits" is:

καρποί — karpoi

It means fruit, produce, or the visible result of a living thing. A tree is known by its ***karpoi***. In the same way, people come to know a Christian man not merely through his words, but through what his life produces.

St James says:

"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."
(James 2:17, RSV-CE)

The Greek word for "works" is:

ἔργα — erga

These are deeds and actions: the things a person actually does. Faith is meant to become visible in our ***erga***: in prayer, kindness, service, patience, welcome, forgiveness and faithfulness.

So the movement is very simple.

Last month: "Come and see."

This month: "What will they see?"

May they see the fruits—***karpoi***—of faith in action.

May they see our actions—***erga***—flowing from a life close to Christ.

And that brings us to the deeper question behind every good work:

"How does a man become the kind of person whose life bears good fruit?"

The answer is not simply better tactics, more activity or more meetings. The answer is to remain close to Christ and to let him form our character.

The whole Christian life

The whole Christian life can be seen in the first recorded words of Jesus and in his final words from the Cross.

The first recorded words of Jesus in the Gospel story are found in St Luke. Mary and Joseph find the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, and he says:

"How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"
(Luke 2:49, RSV-CE)

The key Greek phrase is:

ἐν τοῖς τοῦ Πατρός μου — en tois tou Patros mou
"In the things of my Father."

The phrase may refer to the Father's house, but it also has the wider sense of the Father's concerns, the Father's work and the Father's will.

Jesus shows us, from the beginning, where his life is centred.

He is concerned with the things of the Father.

He listens to the Father.

He loves the Father.

He does the Father's will.

He gives himself to the work entrusted to him.

Then, at the end of his earthly life, St Luke records Jesus' final words:

"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!"
(Luke 23:46, RSV-CE)

In Greek:

Πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου — Pater, eis cheiras sou paratithemai to pneuma mou
"Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit."

The word ***παρατίθεμαι — paratithemai*** means "I entrust," "I place into the care of," or "I hand over for safekeeping."

The first words of Jesus are about the Father's things.

The last words of Jesus are about entrusting everything to the Father.

Between those two moments we see the whole life of Jesus: prayer, obedience, friendship, teaching, healing, mercy, service, patience, forgiveness, suffering and love.

Jesus begins with the Father.

Jesus lives for the Father.

Jesus entrusts himself to the Father.

That is the pattern for the whole Christian life.

And this is where the question, “Lord, what is the next good thing?”, comes from.

If Jesus’ life is about the Father’s will, then our life too is not mainly about following our own moods, worries or preferences. It is about listening for the Father’s will in the ordinary circumstances of the day.

We do not usually receive a complete map of our lives all at once. God generally gives us light for the next step.

So, each desired moment, particularly in the morning, after we have placed ourselves before God, we can ask:

Lord, what are the things of the Father that you place before me today?
“What is the next good thing you ask of me?”

It may be a prayer.

It may be Holy Mass.

It may be a kind word.

It may be a phone call.

It may be a visit.

It may be a small duty done properly.

It may be an apology.

It may be forgiveness.

It may be quietly trusting God with something we cannot control.

Then, at the end of the day, we do what Jesus did. We entrust everything back to the Father:

“Father, into your hands I place this day—its work, its joys, its worries, its mistakes and all that remains unfinished.”

This is not a complicated programme. It is a life of trust.

This is faith in action.

St John also records another final saying of Jesus from the Cross:

“It is finished.”
(John 19:30, RSV-CE)

In Greek:

Τετέλεσται — Tetelestai
“It has been accomplished.”
“It has been brought to fulfilment.”

Jesus has completed the work of love entrusted to him by the Father.

We too are not asked to do everything. We are asked to do faithfully the next good work God gives us.

Seeing through the eyes of Christ

To know the next good thing, we need to learn to see differently.

We often think that we see people and situations exactly as they are. Yet we all see through a lens shaped by our fears, past experiences, tiredness, worries, hopes and expectations. I vaguely recall reading somewhere that we do not see reality simply as it is; we see it as we are.

This touches on what philosophers call epistemology, the study of knowledge: how we know, how we judge, and the limits of what we can know. We receive reality through our senses, our minds and our own limited experience. This does not mean that reality is unreal or unknowable; rather, it reminds us that our own way of seeing can be partial and imperfect.

As Christians, we are called to something greater. We seek to know God, who is eternal and beyond the limits of our own understanding. Therefore, we ask not only to see more clearly, but to see as Christ sees. We ask him to purify our vision: to help us see people with compassion, circumstances with faith, our own weaknesses with humility, and the world with hope. The more we learn to see through the eyes of Christ, the more able we become to recognise his presence—and to follow him more faithfully

The Christian asks the Lord for a new way of seeing.

Jesus saw Zacchaeus not simply as a tax collector, but as a man whom grace could change (Luke 19:1–10).

Jesus saw Peter not simply as a fisherman, but as a man with a mission in the Church (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus saw the widow's small offering and recognised the love behind it (Mark 12:41–44).

Jesus saw crowds in need and "had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34, RSV-CE).

We too can ask the Lord to change the way we see.

To see a quiet Brother as someone who may need encouragement.

To see a newcomer as a person to welcome.

To see a younger Catholic man as someone loved by God, perhaps looking for faith, friendship and purpose.

To see an older Brother as someone with wisdom, prayer, experience and a faithful example to offer.

To see parish needs as opportunities to serve Christ.

To see ordinary tasks as places where love can become visible.

This is close to the wisdom of St Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatian discernment helps us notice the direction in which our thoughts, choices and actions are leading us.

A simple question can guide us:

Is this bringing me closer to Christ, or taking me away from Christ?

Does this choice help me grow in faith, hope and love?

Does it help me become more patient, more generous, more peaceful and more willing to serve?

Does it help me see and love people as Jesus does?

Or does it move me towards anger, resentment, selfishness, discouragement or pride?

In Ignatian spirituality, "consolation" is an interior movement that increases faith, hope and love and draws a person closer to God. "Desolation" is the opposite movement, drawing us away from God and leaving us spiritually unsettled.

The question "What is the next good thing?" is therefore not simply about being busy. It is a question of discernment:

Lord, which next step leads me closer to you?
Which next action will help me love you and serve my neighbour more faithfully?

How will we respond?

There is another word that can help us: "respond".

The word comes from the Latin *"respondere": "re",* meaning "back" or "again," and *"spondere",* meaning "to promise" or "to pledge." A response, therefore, is more than a reaction. It is an answer that can express or renew a pledge.

Every day gives us opportunities to respond.

A Brother is unwell.

A parish needs help.

A family member is struggling.

A newcomer arrives.

A difficult conversation takes place.

A disappointment comes.

A duty needs attention.

The question is not simply: “What happened?”

The Christian question is:

“How will I respond?”

Will I respond with faith or fear?

Will I respond with patience or frustration?

Will I respond with encouragement or complaint?

Will I respond with forgiveness or resentment?

Will I respond with prayer or with worry alone?

Will I respond in a way that draws me closer to Christ?

This is where character is formed.

Character is not formed only in great moments. It is formed in the small responses of ordinary days.

It is formed when we choose to listen rather than interrupt.

It is formed when we choose a gentle answer.

It is formed when we pray before reacting.

It is formed when we forgive.

It is formed when we carry out a duty well.

It is formed when we choose gratitude.

It is formed when we entrust to God what we cannot change.

Character and personal holiness

The Knights have a great mission: to foster the Christian way of life throughout the Nation.

Good planning matters.

Good administration matters.

Good communication matters.

Good invitations matter.

But tactics alone do not endure.

Without Christian character, plans can become superficial.

Without personal holiness, activity can lose its depth.

Without prayer, service can become only busyness.

Without charity, fraternity can become only social friendship.

Without Christ, even good works can lose their deepest purpose.

What endures is a man formed by Christ.

A man who trusts God.

A man who prays.

A man who attends Holy Mass.

A man who does his duty faithfully.

A man who keeps his word.

A man who forgives.

A man who is patient with others.

A man who is gentle.

A man who continues to grow.

The Catechism teaches:

All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.
(CCC 2013)

Charity is love of God above all things and love of neighbour for God's sake (CCC 1822).

Personal holiness does not mean becoming perfect all at once.

It means becoming more like Christ, little by little.

Silence, prayer and the saints

The saints made time for God.

They made time for silence.

They made time for prayer.

They loved Holy Mass.

They stayed close to the sacraments.

They did their duties to the best of their ability.

They forgave.

They tried to be gentle.

They were patient with others because they knew that God had been patient with them.

St Benedict begins his Rule with these words:

Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.
(Rule of St Benedict, Prologue 1)

Silence is not empty. It is where we learn to listen with the ear of the heart.

In silence, we can thank God.

In silence, we can bring him our worries.

In silence, we can pray for those we love.

In silence, we can ask forgiveness.

In silence, we can ask:

"Lord, what is the next good thing you ask of me?"

Jesus says:

One who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.
(Luke 16:10, RSV-CE)

Most holiness is formed in little things.

A short prayer in the morning.

A few minutes of silence.

Holy Mass.

A visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

A kind word.

A listening ear.

A phone call to someone who is alone.

A task done carefully.

A prayer for someone in need.

A decision to forgive.

A small act of service done quietly.

These things may seem small, but they are not small in the sight of God.

Progress, not perfection

The Catechism reminds us that Christ's call to conversion continues throughout the Christian life (CCC 1427–1429).

We can grow.

We can change.

We can begin again.

We can take the next step.

This is the message I would like us to remember:

Progress, not perfection.

We are not asked to become saints overnight.

We are called to keep moving towards Christ.

We are not asked to do everything.

We are asked to respond faithfully to the next thing God places before us.

The next prayer.

The next Mass.

The next kind word.

The next act of patience.

The next act of forgiveness.

The next phone call.

The next visit.

The next small duty done well.

The next invitation.

The next moment in which we choose to respond as Christ would ask us to respond.

The Apostles were not perfect. They had weaknesses. They sometimes misunderstood Jesus. They sometimes became afraid. Yet Jesus was patient with them. He taught them, forgave them, formed them and sent them out.

The Lord is patient with us too.

This is especially encouraging for older Brothers. Many have given many years of service to their families, parishes, workplaces and the Knights. Their wisdom, prayer, experience and steadiness are precious gifts.

Growing older does not mean that growth stops.

An older Brother can still pray.

He can still forgive.

He can still encourage.

He can still welcome a younger man.

He can still support a priest.

He can still pass on faith to children and grandchildren.

He can still bring peace and good humour to a gathering.

He can still take the next good step.

A mature tree may not grow as quickly as a young tree, but it has deep roots. It gives shade. It gives shelter. It bears fruit in its season.

What will they see?

Last month, the invitation was:

"Come and see."
(John 1:46, RSV-CE)

This month, the question is:

What will people see when they come?

May they see men who seek the things of the Father.

May they see men who begin each day by asking, "Lord, what is the next good thing you ask of me?"

May they see men who look at people and situations through the eyes of Christ.

May they see men who ask, "Will this bring me closer to Christ or take me away from him?"

May they see men who respond—not merely react—with faith, patience, gentleness and love.

May they see men who make time for silence, prayer and Holy Mass.

May they see men who do ordinary duties faithfully.

May they see men who forgive because they know they have been forgiven.

May they see men who are gentle because they know God has been patient with them.

May they see men who end each day by placing themselves and their work into the Father's hands.

May they see men who are not perfect, but who are making progress.

This is how "Come and see" becomes believable.

This is how faith becomes visible.

This is how the Knights can foster the Christian way of life—not simply through plans, tactics or activities, but through Christian character and personal holiness.

May we become, by God's grace, a fraternity of ordinary Catholic men who keep looking to Christ, keep responding to the next good thing he asks of us, and little by little become living saints.

Amen.

Discussion questions

- If a Catholic man came among us today, what fruits—***καρποί (karpoi)***—of faith, fraternity and service would he see?

- How do Jesus' first words—***ἐν τοῖς τοῦ Πατρός μου (en tois tou Patros mou***), "in the things of my Father"—and his final words—***Πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου (Pater, eis cheiras sou paratithemai to pneuma mou)***, "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit"—give us a pattern for the whole Christian life?

- What helps me see people and situations through the eyes of Christ?

- When I face a choice, how can I ask: "Will this bring me closer to Christ or take me away from him?"

- How can I respond—not merely react—to the next situation God places before me?

- What is the next good thing God is asking of me today?

- Where is God inviting me to make progress, not perfection, in prayer, patience, forgiveness, service or trust?

- How can our Branch become a place where people encounter genuine Christian character, personal holiness, welcome and the fruits of the Holy Spirit?