I. Introduction

An old Chinese legend says that one day an emperor summoned young people from all across the kingdom to the capital city. When they gathered at the courtyard of the royal palace, he addressed them, saying, “When I die, one of you will become the next emperor. As you leave here today, my servants will give each of you a magic seed. You must plant it, nurture it, and care for it. One year from today, you will return here with your plants, and by looking at them, I will know who is worthy to be the next emperor.” Each young person took his or her seed and hurried home, filled with excitement and determination, including a young man named Ling. He planted his seed and faithfully watered it each day, but it failed to sprout. All his friends, aided and abetted by their parents, boasted about how their seeds had brought forth large and beautiful plants, but Ling had nothing to show for his efforts, and he felt ashamed and embarrassed.

When the year was up, Ling was afraid to return to the emperor’s palace, but his mother insisted it was his duty to go, so he went off. The royal courtyard was filled with young people carrying beautiful flowers, bushes, and even small trees, and Ling, in his embarrassment, tried to hide in a corner. When the emperor came out, he seemed unimpressed by the many different thriving plants. Spotting Ling, however, he ordered the guards to bring him forward. Everyone laughed at the spectacle of this young man holding a simple clay pot devoid of life, and Ling himself feared he was about to be put to death for his failure. To the shock of everyone present, however, the emperor announced, “Today I have chosen your new emperor. Behold! It is this boy!” Ling stammered, “But, but, your majesty, I don’t understand; I failed to grow anything from my seed.” The emperor explained, “That’s the point. A year ago I gave everyone here not a magic seed, but an ordinary stone; no one could have grown anything from it. All the others here are frauds. Only you had the courage and honesty to return here and tell me the truth—and that’s why you alone have the makings of an emperor!” (William J. Bausch, The Story Revealed, p. 113). Whether we’re called to be leaders or followers, we cannot succeed in our mission in life without integrity—everything else is not of God.

II. Development

The most important decision we’ll ever make—a decision we renew and confirm each day of our lives—is whether or not we’ll be true to God and thereby true to ourselves. In the Letter to the Romans St. Paul urges us not to conform ourselves to this age—in other words, not to go along with the false values of this world, but instead to discern and follow the will of God. However, this is not always an easy thing to do. The prophet Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed God’s word—but it was an unpopular message, warning the people that unless they repented of their sins, the nation was doomed. As a result, Jeremiah was ridiculed, despised, and persecuted—and in the 1st Reading he complains to God about how much he has suffered because of answering the Lord’s call. Though he
didn’t realize it, Jeremiah was doing what Jesus commands us to do in today’s Gospel: namely, taking up his cross each day. We too are called by the Lord to live with courage and integrity, thereby imitating the example of Jesus, Who would not turn away from His mission—even when Peter mistakenly urged Him to do so. Nothing this world can offer is worth compromising our moral values or denying our faith—for as Our Lord warns us, we will one day be judged by Him, and will be repaid according to our conduct. That will be the moment of truth, and the entire heavenly court and all of humanity will see whether or not we had chosen the way of truth or the way of deception.

III. Conclusion

Many times in life we may be sorely tempted to put on an act, much as most of the young people in the Chinese legend pretended they had grown wonderful plants from the supposedly magic seeds they had been given; quite often we want to appear important, accomplished, and successful. However, God looks into our hearts, and He sees the absolute truth about us—including whether or not we’re trying to discover and answer His call. Two elderly women in England were walking through an overcrowded church cemetery, and noticed a tombstone, on which was carved the words, “Here lies John Smith, a politician and an honest man.” One of the women exclaimed, “Good heavens! It’s a shame the cemetery is so crowded they had to put two people in the same grave!”

We can laugh about dishonest politicians, but an election year is a good time for us to remember that God is judging not only all the political candidates, but also the persons who vote for them. When we enter the voting booth in a few months, we will be making a moral decision—especially if some candidates are much stronger on right-to-life and religious liberty issues than others. Voters who act out of habit, self-interest, or personal preference, rather than moral or religious values, are taking a grave risk; by refusing to deny themselves for the sake of the Gospel, they fail to put God first in their lives.

The same temptation can exist in many other areas of life: finances, relationships, career choices, leisure activities, conversations, chance encounters, and the fulfilling of our religious and spiritual duties. In all things we must ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do? What does the Lord want me to do in this situation? Which choices and actions will bring me closer to Him?” An important part of taking up our cross and following after Jesus involves honestly trying to discern His will, and doing our best to carry it out. We must form the habit of quickly and automatically praying to God for guidance and assistance in every important choice we make, and even in routine decisions; we must teach ourselves to use the Gifts of the Holy Spirit given to us in Confirmation, and try to see everyone and everything from Christ’s point of view. Above all, we must remember that one day we will stand before Jesus, and review our lives with Him. At that moment every comforting illusion, excuse, and self-deception will be stripped away, and we will see ourselves as we truly are. This will be a moment of either unbearable shame and despair, or humble relief and rejoicing. You and I are called to begin preparing for this all-important judgment by living lives of integrity right here and now—for only in this way can we fulfill our mission on earth and one day enter into the joy of Heaven.