

One of my favorite books that I discovered in junior high school are the series of books called "The Lord of the Rings" and their prequel "The Hobbit," recently made into the films over the last decade.

There are many memorable lines, but one of my favorite moments is at the start of the journey. Gandalf the Grey the wise wizard introduces himself to Bilbo, and invites him to come on an adventure with him. Bilbo is initially reluctant, for the Shire is all he's known, the place where there are friends, family, safety, security and warmth. And when he protests and makes excuses about why he cannot go, Gandalf says to him: "You will have to do without pocket handkerchiefs, and a great many other things, before we reach our journey's end, Bilbo Baggins. You were born to the rolling hills and little rivers of the Shire, but home is now behind you. The world is ahead." It's a theme that will continue throughout the books. When we later meet Frodo his nephew and his best friend Samwise, they too will be reluctant to leave. When Frodo comes to possess the powerful ring that Bilbo found on his earlier journey, and Gandalf knows that it is in fact evil and has to be destroyed by Frodo, he will say to him: "I will help you bear this burden, as long as it is yours to bear. But we must do something, soon. The Enemy is moving." The journey is indeed very hard and painful. But

because he makes it, Frodo returns not only a hero for destroying the ring and overcoming the evil, but a man changed for the better as well because he died to himself and his fears, and surrendered to something far greater, in the process not only saving others, but finding himself.

While John Ronald Reul Tolkien's books are fictional, they present a very important spiritual insight: None of us lives for oneself, and none of us dies for oneself, for if we live, we live for the Lord.

In real life, when a person is able to think like that, they too can find so much about themselves and in the process do such great things for other people.

Though it might not get as much publicity as it should, Latin America is a place with great need. And among those helping to bring hope to people down there is a Jesuit priest by the name of Fr. Brian Christopher.

He's been to El Salvador several times, and also worked extensively in Honduras.

In 1997, the summer before he entered the Jesuits, he went with two academics. He was amazed at what he saw.

Bullet holes still riddled the walls of the buildings. It was only four years after the peace accords were signed.

Fr. Christopher that day visited the tombs of the six Jesuits who had been murdered there during the civil war. But he says the most powerful part was visiting neighboring small towns of Aguilares and El Paisnal. Here Fr. Rutilo Grande was born and worked, and murdered on the road between the two. Since then, Fr. Brian learned that Fr. Grande was a man riddled with doubts and anxiety. But he always remained with his people showing love and compassion.

It was around this time that he decided to surrender to God's call for him to follow in the footsteps of these priests who served in Latin America by answering the call to become a Jesuit priest.

He actually met his first Jesuit as a young boy in the late 1970s. He was the youngest of 7 kids in a Catholic family. His dad, a political science

professor at Saint Louis University, hosted dinner parties. Students and colleagues, Jesuits and lay alike, engaged in spirited conversation about US foreign policy, social justice and El Salvador's Civil War. He remembers as a child waking from a nightmare where his family had relocated from leafy Saint Louis to war-torn El Salvador. But today, perhaps because a Jesuit vocation is often characterized by irony, El Salvador and it's Northern Triangle neighbors of Honduras and Belize are the places where his heart now resides.

He learned the Catholic faith as a child, learning the prayers at Catholic school, but seeing the faith in action through his parents. He remembers his mom teaching to him about Jesus with warmth and affection, and says his parents mediated Christ for him and made Jesus approachable.

As he got older, he found the closeness of Jesus in his prayer life. Prayer for him became consoling, but he says that when he prayed he tangibly felt God's presence. In his words, "Jesus, for me, was a very close friend, and that never went away."

He went to high school, and a Jesuit began challenging him there. He'd take students to do community service in North Saint Louis neighborhoods plagued by drugs, violence and poverty. On the way, he'd ask the students "how many burned out buildings do you see? How many liquor billboards? Does this look like your neighborhood?" And then he cut to the chase: "What does God think about that?"

Not too long after that, the future Fr. Chris found himself on a retreat consumed by Fr. Putthoff, and he realized that God was in fact inviting him to something. He heard God ask, "How far are you willing to go with me? Do you want in on this thing I'm doing in the world?" Fr. Chris says it felt like a dare at the time, but then the thought of being a Jesuit entered his head. In college at this time. He was also caring for his ailing father, the brilliant professor rendered mute by Diffuse Lewy Body Disease. Fr. Chris reflected: "When the brokenness comes into your own home and you're no longer in power, it's an experience of poverty. That's what following Jesus means: you face the cross."

A few months after graduation in 1997, he entered the Jesuits. His formation took him to new places: the underserved neighborhoods of

Chicago and St. Louis, to Ethiopia, El Salvador, Honduras and, as a novice, to Belize, the small Central American country with the third highest per capita murder rate in the world.

He loved it and, after ordination, was sent back. Fr. Christopher lived at St. Martin de Porres Parish in Belize City, surrounded by 23 street gangs trying to get a piece of the country's booming drug trade. He spent time on the streets and in the jails and helped start a nonprofit to provide job training to those trying to climb their way out of poverty. The work was challenging and consoling but a losing battle.

"It became painfully clear that we were looking at the wrong problem. Of course people needed jobs. But most of the people we worked with also carried deeper, older wounds from the traumas they had endured," Fr. Christopher remembers. "These young men and women lived lives that were constantly chaotic, and it was hard for them to hold a regular job, when facing crisis after crisis. They would just stop showing up."

But Fr. Chris didn't stop showing up. He brought together a group of local therapists and did a study on PTSD in youth, which led to Belize 2020, a

project between Saint Louis University and Saint Martin's Parish to help people. Most recently, he's now in San Antonio in a working-class parish that's an important regional center for Hispanic Catholics. He's also doing community organizing work in San Antonio.

As he looks at his life now, he says: "God is still daring me, and I am still as stubborn as can be. But guess what? I'm not in charge and I hope Christ is, so I have to trust and see what God has in mind for me, and I have just enough of a sense of adventure that allows me to say, 'OK, I'll go.'"

The question for you and me this week is what will we say to God?

Our second reading from Romans is one of my favorites that sometimes a family will pick out at a funeral. Paul tells his community the way of the Christian is that "None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself, for if we live, we live for the Lord."

The problem is so often throughout history, due to original sin's effects, a person can say I live for myself. And it's understandable why this happens. As infants and children, we are led to believe that we are the center of the

world. Certainly someone should attend to a crying child. Needs should be provided for. But as a child ages, if everything is always tended to, and they always get their way every time, a problem develops. In his reflection this week, Bishop Robert Barron cites Fr. Richard Rohr, the writer and spiritual director, who studied a lot of initiation rituals in various cultures throughout the world, growing up into an adult means confront the reality that life is hard, you are not that important, you are not in control, you are going to die, and your life is not about you. However in modern society, we run into a problem of many Peter Pans in the world. Some don't want to grow up, whether it's a teenager who isn't maturing due to enabling by parents, the millennial who expects everything provided for even though they are pushing 30, or the Gen-Xer who is focused on their career and ambition and never stopped to think about the importance of serving others. Now obviously, there are countless teens, twenty-somethings, and middle aged people who do get it and do a lot for charity and helping others in need. But it would seem more and more in the world, there are a growing number of people looking for a safe space, or just not growing up. As Bishop Barron puts it, "our culture today seems to be stuck in permanent adolescence." So what is the antidote?

A good starting point is being open to the ideas of others.

First and foremost, this includes God. We need to make time for prayer, and to carefully listen for the voice of God. Like Fr. Brian found out in his prayer, God was daring Him. God is daring us too - but we have to listen to Him. He may challenge us to change and try something new; or affirm what we are doing. But to know His plan we have to listen.

Among some the term “safe space” has become popular. Well if we are talking about not verbally abusing and shouting, that’s a good thing. But if we carry that notion too far, the ideas of the other become a threat. The message is “my idea is the only valid point” and “I’m not going to listen to what this other person has to say.” A mature mentality though is to say “wait a minute. I stick to my principles, but I can have an argument, a disagreement. I can listen to this person without shouting at them.” When we start thinking like that, we realize that there are other ways to look at something, and we also build relationships and bridges with others.

A grown up is also someone who is a person of action. As Fr. Brian said, following Jesus means facing the Cross. Paul will speak of being a “slave”

for Christ. A slave was someone's property - someone owned you. But by being a slave for God, the paradox is that is when we are most free. Once we hear God's plan and discern it, like Fr. Brian, we have to carry it out. It's not easy. As my moral theology professor put it, when you said yes to being a priest, you said yes to everything else too that goes along with it - to the papers, the exams, the working in the teaching parish, the prayer, the meetings, the evaluations. The same is true for you too no matter what your vocation. It requires work. But when we work at it and do what we need to do, we truly leave an impact in the world and change lives for the better because we are doing God's work. We can't say "yes" to God and expect that this results in Him doing everything for us.

Lastly, as we work to carry out God's plan, it's worth meditating on this reading from Romans from time to time in the sense that we ask ourselves how we are doing at living for God. There are always new ways we can serve, or turn our love up a notch. But there's always ways selfishness or not thinking of others can creep in too. Forgiveness is a theme throughout our Gospel - maybe we are refusing to forgive someone or hold a grudge. Or we aren't seeing the needs of people around us. Perhaps we are becoming more expectant of others doing things for us, or taking

advantage of us. Change often comes gradually, and it can be easy to fall into habits, or to lull ourselves into thinking we have no more work to do spiritually. The saints though realize how to fully live for God and when you look at their lives go from being good people of virtue to being perfect, because they learned how to truly live not for themselves but for God. In explaining the history of the ring to Frodo and why he must leave the Shire and make the long journey ahead, Gandalf and Frodo have an encounter.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo, referring to the mission he is about to undertake to destroy the ring to save the world.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

So what are we doing to do with the time God has given us? God's called you and me out of the Shire and out of our safe space into an adventure, and once we reach the point of Saint Paul and can say whether we live or die we are the Lord's, trusting that even though we don't know how the

adventure will end He has a plan for us that will work out in the end, we too can do such great things with our lives for God's glory. Let's be a spiritual grown up and do just that, remembering it's not about us, but about Him, returning the love He has given us, and in the process, helping to make this world a truly beautiful place where God's love is seen through us.