

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - The Cost of Discipleship

June 26, 2022.

The cost of discipleship is the central theme of this Sunday's Gospel (Luke 9:51-62). In the text Jesus has "**set his face towards Jerusalem**" in order to fulfill God's plan for his life, a plan that involves a cross and crucifixion on Calvary. As Jesus travels towards Jerusalem, he encounters three would-be followers. Along the road the first man said, Lord I'm ready to follow you wherever you go. Jesus replied **Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.** To another Jesus said, "follow me," and the man replied, "I'll come along but first I need to take care of some family business. I have to bury my father." To this, Jesus replied, **Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.** Jesus was pretty harsh with these fellows. Now let's be reasonable. He could have cut them some slack, couldn't he? Burying one's father and going home to say goodbye to family and friends are perfectly normal things to do. Yet **in his words to his would-be followers, Jesus is making it clear what the cost of following him is.**

As modern-day followers of Jesus, we, too, stand under his words. We, too, must face the cost of discipleship. **Our journey, the Christin life, parallels the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. Jesus is telling us, up front, that our journey with him will not be an easy one. If we follow in the way of Jesus, we cannot expect to have an easier road to travel than the Master does.** For as the Father has sent Jesus, even so he sends us. Signing on with Jesus means that everything becomes secondary to serving the Kingdom of God and sharing the gospel. **Following will cost us. He tells us we will be less secure than foxes and birds.** Jesus is letting his followers know the urgency of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom's call is more urgent than the need to bury our parents and more urgent than saying farewell to friends. The reason the text strikes a chord of dissonance in us is because family and friends are important. They are the most important things in the world, in terms of our human affairs. By saying they are secondary to the Kingdom, Jesus is telling us that God's affairs take priority over human affairs, no matter how important they may be. In his words about counting the cost, Jesus is not trying to be "heavy." He is not being "mean," he's being Lord. "To have a Lord, is to have a Lord." Meaning, one's primary allegiance is to that Lord. **Service to the Lord takes priority over everything else.** Jesus is not against "burying the dead," nor is he anti-"family values." He was speaking to those would-be followers of his own experience. He, too, was serving God. He, too, made the Kingdom his top priority. He, too, left his parents. He, too, went away from his hometown Nazareth, and all his friends. He knew of what he spoke. He had counted the cost. He would not ask any would-be followers to do things he, himself, had not already done. Or to go to places he, himself had not already gone.

As Christians on the verge of the 21st Century, it would be easy to think the cost of discipleship has been lowered. We don't have to literally follow the Lord. I mean, really. After all, we've come a long way. There are almost a billion Christians in the world, not just a small band of followers like back then. We have large and complex church structures, giant cathedrals, tons of bishops, loads of deacons, and an abundance of sisters. The pews are filled to the brim in many of our "mega parishes." We have church agencies and charities; we even have church-run Web pages and "God-link" computer networks. Thus, as individuals, we don't have to sweat it. We don't have to worry about leaving home and hearth. All the bases are covered! **Unfortunately, the cost of discipleship is not time-conditioned. We are under the same word as the first disciples. We, too, are less secure in the world than foxes and birds. If we feel more secure than foxes and birds, perhaps we are spending too much time burying our dead, chatting with friends, and looking back over the plow.**

But **Jesus said, No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.**" (Luke 9:62). Jesus' image of setting hands to the plow would have been extremely eloquent for his listeners. They lived close to the land and knew about farming. They would have known that plowing fields by hand was no easy task. The farmer hitched the plow to oxen or cattle, or sometimes even to a donkey. As the animal made its way across the field, the farmer held the handles of the plow and pressed the blade into the ground, cutting a furrow that would later be used for planting. To make the best use of the field, the furrows had to be straight. This meant keeping an eye out constantly to direct the often stubborn animals. To make sure the seeds would germinate, the furrows had to be deep. This meant keeping a firm and steady hand on the plow itself, for long periods of time, in spite of hard or rocky soil that resisted the blade of the plow. It was slow exhausting work. Many times a farmer would be tempted to take a rest or relax his grip. But the plowing season was brief. If the farmers didn't keep their hands to the plow, their harvest would be poor. **Following Christ is no different. Once we get into it, we discover how demanding it really is.** And when difficulties and trials pop up, we are tempted to look back at the apparent ease and comfort of a self-centred life. But if we give in to that temptation, we lose. Only Christ's Kingdom lasts forever, only God can fill the deepest longings of our hearts - the hard work that fidelity to God's will requires pays for itself with eternal returns.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus' recommendation to keep our hands to the plow applies to the dramatic difficulties of life and to the dramatic temptations that try to lure us away from our friendship with Christ. It applies to the normal difficulties of every day. Many who grow up in a farm know that plowing fields is not very exciting or dramatic work. And yet, without it we can't bring in a harvest. In the same way, **unless we are faithful to Christ in the normal tasks of our daily lives, we cannot grow in Christian virtue, and we cannot bring in the harvest of joy, peace, wisdom, and fulfillment that Christ wants to give us.** Keeping our hands to the plow in daily life means being faithful to our normal responsibilities. It means doing our jobs the way Christ would do them if he were in our position. It means doing our chores the way Jesus, Mary, and Joseph did them in Nazareth - responsibly, thoroughly, and humbly. It means using our time well, not wasting it on habits of laziness and self-indulgence. It means patiently putting up with the imperfections of those around us, day after day, just as God puts up with our own imperfections. This is the bread-and-butter of Christian living. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is keeping our hands to the plow. It's not always dramatic and exciting, but it's the only way to live a fruitful life.

We do not plow and look back; plowing also means going forward. Life in Christ is a journey. As St. Anthony of Padua said **"Christians must lean on the Cross of Christ just as travellers lean on a staff when they begin a long journey."** The hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers," teaches us this as well. The Journey of life in Christ is always forward though is never easy. Yet the Lord who has called us to follow, will stay with us along the way, of this we can be assured. **"Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus going on before. Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe; Forward into battle see His banners go! Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod. We are not divided, all one body we, One in hope and doctrine, one in charity. Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane, But the church of Jesus constant will remain. Gates of hell can never gainst that church prevail; We have Christ s own promise, and that cannot fail."**
Amen