

## **23RD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - SEPTEMBER 6, 1992 - BLESSED SACRAMENT**

The problem with today's Gospel is not really that it is too difficult to understand. The words are fairly plain: no one can be a disciple of Jesus who is not ready to surrender everything if this should be required. The parables that illustrate the message are direct: people ridicule a man who starts building something he doesn't have the funds to complete; you don't go out into battle with someone who has twice your army, you seek peace. Know what you're getting into if you decide to follow me, Jesus is saying; don't start unless you're willing to go the whole way; don't start what you can't finish, as the saying goes. Common sense wisdom illustrates a very uncommon demand. We'll never be able to say he didn't warn us.

Of course, I expect that we all hope that he won't require us to surrender all that he says might be required: our parents, our spouse and children, our brothers and sisters, our own lives. And there's nothing wrong with hoping this: all these are wonderful gifts, things and persons we rightly and honorably love, to possess which and to love which are great gifts of God, for which we should be grateful. But they are not what we should love above all things, and there is a love that should be deeper and higher and broader than the love we have for them, a good to possess which we must be ready to surrender even them.

What an extraordinary claim this is! If we had no Scriptural passages and no Church tradition teaching us that Jesus is the Son of God, a passage like this would draw us toward that affirmation. For what is a person's God but that for which he would be willing to surrender everything he has and loves? Did not Jesus himself say that the first commandment is to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls and bodies? And what else is he asking of us here but that we love him that totally, that fully?

One day, of course, this is precisely what will be required of us. The day will come to each of us when we will have to surrender all these persons and all these things, see them slip from us, find ourselves as naked as when we came into the world. What will be left of us then, at the moment of death, if we have staked our lives on any one of these things or persons and now know that we must say good-bye to them? We define and make ourselves what we are by what we love most deeply and most ultimately. And Jesus today reminds us that it is only he--only our God--that can still be present, sustaining our existence, defining its center, assuring its goal, when death begins to split us from all else that, even rightly, supported and enriched our lives.

When we decide to become and to remain Christians, then, we are not deciding on something trivial, just another among the many decisions we have to make. We are deciding on what will define the meaning of our lives and determine how successfully we have led them. The building we are constructing with our lives will be finished only when we successfully pass through the darkness of death; the battle in which we are engaged will be won only when the light of the resurrection he promises beyond death dawns on us. We can't say he didn't warn us. We can't say we didn't know what we were getting into. But he does not demand more than he himself was willing to give--to his Father and to us--and his promise is that we will find again, richer and finer and more fully enjoyed, all that we have been called to surrender.