

23RD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - SEPTEMBER 10, 1995 - BLESSED SACRAMENT

Before the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian, published a book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. When he wrote the book, Bonhoeffer surely had no knowledge of how high the cost of his own discipleship would be. After the rise of Hitler, he was a member of what was called "the Confessing Church," which published the powerful Barmen Declaration calling on Christians to resist the attempts of the Nazi regime to enlist the churches in support of its ideology. Caught on this side of the Atlantic when the war broke out, Bonhoeffer went back, telling his friends here that his Christian duty lay in his homeland. He continued his resistance to the regime and was arrested late in the war and executed.

The Gospel today calls Bonhoeffer's example to mind. In two homely images Jesus asks his disciples at the beginning whether they are ready to undertake what his call may require. They should not be like the builder who began what he could not finish or like a king who goes to war with an outmatched army. Before and after these metaphors are the two exigent calls: "If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower. Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." "None of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his possessions."

Now in fact Jesus did not require all his hearers to renounce their possessions and their families: there is enough evidence that his disciples included people who did not surrender them. But does this mean that he was simply indulging in Middle Eastern hyperbole? It would, of course, be comforting to think so. We could all then let pass the brief moment of discomfort this Gospel may cause and sink back into our normal, compromising Christianity.

But perhaps there are two considerations that should give us pause. The first is the example of Bonhoeffer. We look at him with admiration, praise his heroic Christianity, and wish that there had been more like him. But what was it that enabled him to be a hero --to speak out when so many were silent, to return when so many stayed here, to resist when so many compromised--to let go of his family, possessions, indeed his very self for the sake of Christ? Surely in the earlier years of normalcy, of family life, of pastoring, he must have achieved a degree of freedom in his faith and trust in Christ that, when, unexpectedly, the crisis came, he was prepared. Did not Aristotle say that it is in moments of crisis that one's true self is revealed? What would we do, what would we show our true selves to be, if, God forbid, a similar crisis were to confront us? What in fact do we do, what selves do we reveal, when lesser choices face us even now, in conditions of normalcy?

The other consideration is that in fact one day we will all have to do what Christ today requires: let go of our father and mother, our spouses and children, our brothers and sisters, our possessions, and take up the cross of our own deaths. Will we have anything left when all of that recedes from our embrace? After naming all those things Jesus adds the final surrender he expects: one's very self. Well, when all else fades, will there still be a self which now we can also surrender into God's hands, or will we have so defined ourselves by those possessions, wonderful even as some of them are, that to lose them is to lose our very selves? An extraordinary love of God for each of us is revealed in this fierce claim of Christ: he doesn't want our families, friends, possessions, accomplishments: he wants us, each of us, and he wants us freely given, freely surrendered into his hands. And that is not something he wishes only at the end: already, here and now, he wants the sort of disciple he will want at the end: people who know what the "one thing necessary" is and who live their lives, and not only their deaths, in commitment to it. Already he wishes us to love him above all things and in all things.

"Practice dying," an ancient poet said, and he wasn't being morbid. Death puts a period at the end of our lives. The question is: what kind of sentence have we been writing? what has it been saying? and what does it mean?