

23rd Sunday of the Year - September 9, 2001 - Blessed Sacrament

In the passages we have been following for the last several weeks, St. Luke is describing the long resolute journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, where his message and mission will reach their climax in his passage through death and resurrection. His teaching during this journey sets out the terms and conditions of discipleship, of the decision to step out onto the same dusty road Jesus is walking. Today he warns the merely enthusiastic: the road he is walking is headed toward a cross, and the only ones worthy of him must be prepared to take up the cross themselves. That may lie down the road, but the only way to prepare for it is a radical choice, a choice for Jesus that at some point may have to be a choice against—that is what “hating” means here--hating parents, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even one’s own self, for the sake of Christ and following after him. From the beginning he wanted them to be clear-sighted about what was at stake: don’t start building this tower and then discover you don’t have the funds to complete it; don’t go out for this battle without enough resources to win it.

In fact, in Jesus’ own time, following him often meant this reversal or substitution of loyalties. He called people to prepare for the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom, a liberation through grace that potentially required the surrender of everything else—all one’s possessions, he tells us today. The little band of disciples that now appeared on the social landscape of first-century Palestine constituted a new community, they were now a new family, and this community represented the first impact that Jesus of Nazareth had. Something new was appearing; something new was occurring.

This readiness to surrender all today does not appear to be so evidently required. Catholics have had a tendency to lay this duty off onto others, onto priests or vowed religious, or onto exceptional religious types—they’re the ones who are supposed to take the beatitudes seriously; the rest of us, meanwhile, can continue on our compromising way, content with the commandments. But I don’t think this is a legitimate, permissible option for us. Jesus is not addressing a community of monks in today’s reading. He is addressing us. No one of us should presume that he is not talking to us, individually.

To be able to hear what he has to say, of course, we have to be taking our own lives with a certain degree of seriousness. How do we sum up a person’s life? By trying to find the primary motivating goal, the kind of thing that gave it purpose, character, definition, substance—what he valued most, what she thought more important than everything else, what it was they would hang onto even at the price of seeing everything else slip away. It’s on that level that one has to be reflecting in order to hear what Jesus is saying today. He is asking what we are living for? What counts most in our lives? What story are we telling by our lives? Where is this journey leading? What statue are we sculpting by the decisions and actions of our lives? Multiply the metaphors: we are doing something with our lives, making something with them: what is it? And is it good, true, beautiful? There are answers to such questions, but we’ll never find them unless we ask the questions.

From today’s Gospel we should take away at least the challenge of such basic reflection on our lives, and on where Christ himself fits in, what difference his person and his message make, whether we are walking on the same path he is taking, whether we are ready to pay the cost of following after him.