

**TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - SEPTEMBER 5, 2010 - ST. JOHN'S, GOSHEN**

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Let us hear that again, in all its shocking clarity: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” This is the first of three statements in today’s Gospel in which Jesus sets out what it will require of anyone to be his follower. The other two are no less startling: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” The cross was a horrible instrument, a torturing means of execution, but that is what Jesus says following him, being his disciple, means. After two small parables about counting the cost beforehand, he repeats the demand: “Anyone of you who does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple.”

If a serious inquirer were to ask, “What does it mean, what does it require, to be a Christian?” I doubt that many of us would immediately answer: “Well, you have to renounce all your possessions. You have to carry a cross. You have to hate your closest relatives.” These are not the sorts of statements we usually see on advertisements that invite people to consider becoming a Christian. But, to refer to the two parables, this is the cost of building that tower, and these are the troops that king needed for his war. What are we to make of it all?

Yes, it is true that Jesus did not mean “hate” in the sense of positively wishing harm, and St. Matthew’s version softens the saying somewhat: “Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,” thus explaining that Jesus means something positive: that we are to love him more than father or mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. But St. Luke’s version, which we heard, is useful for posing us before the radical claims that Jesus was making, that Jesus is still making, only now to us who hear his words today. He is claiming what only God can claim: a commitment, a dedication, to him that surpasses in importance any other commitment, any other dedication, any other loyalty, any other love, no matter how legitimate, no matter how good. If it should come down to it, one has to choose Christ and his cause over all those other objects of our loving devotion.

Christ, then, is making a total demand, which can be met only by faith, a surrendering of ourselves in trust to God. Cardinal Newman spoke of it as “the venture of faith,” the dare, the risk, of faith: “our duty lies,” he said, “in risking upon Christ’s word what we have, for what we have not; and doing so in a noble, generous way, not indeed rashly or lightly, still without knowing accurately what we are doing, not knowing either what we give up, nor again what we shall gain; uncertain about our reward, uncertain about our extent of sacrifice, in all respects leaning, waiting upon Him, trusting in Him to fulfil His promise, trusting in Him to enable us to fulfil our own vows, and so in all respects proceeding without carefulness or anxiety about the future” (“The Ventures of Faith,” PPS, IV).

Newman’s words remind me of the exhortation that used to be read at the beginning of the marriage-rite which described the venture of faith that a couple make in choosing to share the future together. “That future,” it said, “with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows, is hidden from your eyes. You know that these elements are mingled in every life, and are to be expected in your own. And so not knowing what is before you, you take each other for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.” That is a good description also of the depth and breadth of the commitment Christ asks of us.

There are Christians who from the beginning have made that commitment by deciding to give up everything to follow Christ—think of St. Francis of Assisi or of Mother Teresa. There are many more Christians who have done that when faced with great challenges that required them to oppose family and to risk losing everything for the sake of fidelity to Christ. But of those of us who have not been called in fact to make that kind and degree of commitment, we have to ask how ready we are to make it. In the same sermon Newman wondered how much the typical Christian was willing to risk, to surrender.

I really fear, when we come to examine, it will be found that there is nothing we resolve,

nothing we do, nothing we do not do, nothing we avoid, nothing we choose, nothing we give up, nothing we pursue, which we should not resolve, and do, and not do, and avoid, and choose, and give up, and pursue, if Christ had not died, and heaven were not promised us. I really fear that most men called Christians, whatever they may profess, whatever they may think they feel, whatever warmth and illumination and love they may claim as their own, yet would go on almost as they do, neither much better nor much worse, if they believed Christianity to be a fable.

His point is a valid one. It could be asked in a different form: What is different about our lives because we believe that the Gospel is true, because we believe there is a God, because we believe that Jesus Christ died for us, because we believe that he has made us to share in his own risen life? It probably will not happen that many of us, or even that any of us, will be required to choose between family and Christ, between possessions and Christ, between job and Christ, but that is the choice that Christ wishes us to be ready to make. The day will come, of course, sooner or later, when all that we love will slip from our hands, when we will have to say farewell to all those we love, when the hour of our death finds us alone before Christ. Today's Gospel reminds us that the lives we are living now are supposed to be a preparation for that final surrender. "Into your hands I commend my spirit," were the words of Christ's final surrender on the cross. We cannot prepare for our final surrender better than by a willing and loving surrender into God's hands of all that we are and all that we have. The beautiful prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, could be one way of daily committing ourselves to Christ:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
 my memory, my understanding, and my entire will.  
 All I have and call my own,  
 Whatever I have or hold, you have given me.  
 I return it all to you and surrender it wholly  
 to be governed by your will.  
 Give me only your love and grace:  
 with these I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.