

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Wisdom 9:13-18 / Luke 14:25-33)
04.09.2022
Cost of Discipleship

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Great crowds accompanied Jesus on his way” as we have just heard in today’s gospel. We are part of these great crowds. We want to be Disciples of Christ. We know that we cannot become a disciple once and for all. Each morning has to be a new beginning for us. Each day, we have to renew our decision to follow Jesus. Today, Jesus reminds us of the rules of the game.

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life too, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple... None of you can become my disciple, if you do not give up all your possessions.” We can see that the cost of discipleship is high. To follow Jesus is an exacting way. No question of middle ground for armchair Christians. Jesus is not interested in gaining a large following by softening his words and watering down the requirements needed. Jesus requires of his disciples nothing less than a total commitment. Paradoxically, these hard words of Jesus are Good News. So, let us listen to the Good News, about the way to true discipleship.

“If anyone comes to me without hating his father... he cannot be my disciple”. To hate in the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus, means “to give second place to”. It does not mean intentional, psychological or emotional hostility to our family. Jesus does not ask us to hate the members of our family, he who has told us to love our enemies. Jesus is not violating his own ethic in this passage. His order is instead a radical demand to put God first in our life, and all other matters, including our family and our own life, second. This is what Jesus himself did. We remember Jesus’ answer to those who came to tell him that his mother and his brothers wanted to see him: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice”. Or again we remember the woman who said to him: “Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked”. To this woman Jesus replied: “Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it”. We are called to prefer Christ to all others, to love others in Christ, as Christ loved them, serving them, respecting them, helping them to grow and become who they truly are in God’s sight.

In our lives, do we give the first place to our relationship with Christ and the second place to all our other relationships? Do we enter into relationship with one another in the presence of Christ and in the light of his gospel? In our relationships with others, is it our own interest or the interest of others that comes first? We are called to love one another in the Lord. Saint Benedict, in his Rule for monks, invites us “to prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ”. To be a disciple of Christ is to place Christ and not ourselves at the centre of our existence and all our relationships.

We want to be a follower of Christ but the cost is high. We so often follow our own way or all sorts of idols. The Christ we follow is a crucified Lord and so we are called to total renunciation and total self-giving. We are called to free ourselves from whatever holds us back from serving them wholeheartedly. This is what “to carry our cross” means: To give all that we have and all that we are in the service of Christ and others.

For Jesus' contemporaries, to carry a cross evoked the crucifixion which was a formidable Roman punishment; one used in cases of highway robbery or sedition. So, it is implied that Jesus' disciples will have to cope not only with decisions which will affect their family and their own life, but also with decisions which will involve their being at variance with the political authorities of their time. What was true for the first disciples of Jesus is also true for us today. As disciples, it can happen that we have to express our disagreement with political decisions which do not respect gospel values. This can be difficult and may have painful consequences for us. Examples are not missing today in the news. Let us think for example of the political decision taken in England concerning illegal migrants sent to Rwanda. The authorities of all the Churches have expressed their disagreement in the name of the gospel.

Then Jesus specifies his requirements with two parables. First, Jesus does not want rash, flash in the pan disciples, those who make decisions to follow him in the heat of a fervent moment, decisions that are not sustained and lived out in the routine of everyday life. He wants his disciples to assess the situation fully, like a builder beginning a new project. The builder would be a laughing stock if he poured money into a job that he could not complete. The lesson is clear: We should not start to follow Christ if we are not willing to give Him all we have, including our life.

To reinforce the point, Jesus speaks about a king preparing for war. The king would be completely mad to expose his army to annihilation if the enemy were more powerful than he is. When it comes to Christian discipleship we face a greater battle than any of us could anticipate, a battle that will cost us dearly in terms of personal conversion, repentance and spiritual warfare as we grapple with the forces of evil in the world. We are called to bear witness to Christ to the point of being ready to lay down our lives for him.

To follow Christ through time into eternity costs nothing less than everything. Once again this morning, let us offer our lives to Christ. That is the price of embracing the kingdom of heaven.