

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

REFLECTION 1: COUNTING THE COST

Some of the greatest projects are still unfinished. One well-known example is the Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, Spain. This project was started in 1882 and won't be finished until the year 2026 . . . maybe.

In today's Gospel (Luke 14: 25-33) Jesus tells the crowds that there is a price to pay in becoming a disciple. Jesus likens discipleship to the building of a tower. He says that the builder will need to calculate the cost and plan the execution of the project in order to ensure its completion. So, to be a disciple and to build our faith in Jesus we too need to calculate the cost and begin with full determination to finish. Each of us must ask ourselves, what is the cost of being a Christian? Has our faithfulness to the Gospel ever cost us money, reputation, the possibility of advancement, property or even family harmony?

Perhaps most of us can think of people whose belonging to Jesus cost them dearly; Oscar Romero and Dietrich Bonhoeffer spring to mind. Romero preached strongly against the injustice in his country of El Salvador. He preached a God who was in the hearts of all and who was closely present to those suffering, being totally involved in their liberation. His faith cost him his life – murdered while celebrating the Eucharist on 24th March 1980, Romero's example calls on our courage and perseverance. Bonhoeffer was also martyred for speaking the truth to power. Hung by the Nazis on 9th April 1945, he had been speaking of what he called the 'costly grace' of the Gospel, which confronts us with a gracious call to follow Jesus.

How can we explain such courage and commitment? Well, today's first reading (Wisdom 9: 13-18) the sacred author reminds us that we are not able to grasp the things of earth – like the utter inhumanity of some and the astonishing grace and goodness of others – God sends the Holy Spirit to guide us not to condemn the former but to emulate the latter. In our second reading today Paul allows us to read over his shoulders as he writes to Philemon, a new convert to Christianity telling him to look after the welfare of his slave Onesimus and to treat him with dignity and respect and not just a living tool whose life and death depended on his master.

In the second parable, Jesus offers the king as an example of someone who can assess a situation and plan accordingly. The king has to alter his plans as the situation warranted. Jesus requires similar good sense from us, his disciples, who should be able to carefully read the signs of the times and allow the needs at the time to formulate their agenda. Instead of setting out with a script from which we will never deviate, let us leave room for the spirit of Jesus, who might guide us in a direction we didn't plan and empower us to serve in ways we never imagined.

REFLECTION 2:

ON COUNTING THE COST

Some people get upset when they hear today's Gospel selection (Lc. 14: 25-33); they hear about 'hating one's father and mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters'. Well, the language of the Middle East, Aramaic, Jesus' language is often as vivid as the human mind can make it. So, when Jesus tells us to hate our nearest and dearest, he doesn't mean that literally, rather he means no love in life can compare with the love we must bear to him. Our priority in life must be focused on Jesus and his mission of completing God's kingdom on earth - that our caring extends beyond our own flesh and blood family towards the entire human family. We must follow Jesus not only into church on Sundays but also into the marketplace for the rest of the week.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the crowd that the price of being a follower of his (disciple) is total commitment. All of us know what it is like to be haunted by the spectre of unfinished business. We start out to make or do something and then, when the project is only partially finished we lay it aside. On reflection it recalls our poor planning and lack of resolve. Jesus spoke about this, and to illustrate it he told two brief stories. One was about a man who estimated the cost of building a tower (possibly a watchtower as a lookout post to warn of thieves that might raid his vineyard) to make sure he had enough money to complete it. The other was about a king who calculated his military strength to determine his chances of winning a war. The meaning of these two stories is clear - Jesus was praising the wisdom and careful planning along with cautious action based upon foresight. He was warning would-be disciples to be careful about making a commitment to him and to his cause. In other words, 'Go home, think it over but be sure you can finish it, otherwise do not even start!'

Being a disciple is more than being a follower. We read about instances in the gospels of people who were followers of Jesus but turned away when challenged to become disciples. Discipleship involves accepting and integrating into our lives the teachings and values of the One whose discipleship we become - to live in solidarity with 'the people of God' (Vatican 2) who do without much of what we consider ordinary or even necessary. Jesus would say 'You must not allow any person in this world to stand in the way of your following me - don't be unprepared, be ready to even renounce any possessions that might block the way of being my disciple'.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor in the first half of the 20th century, wrote a book entitled 'The Cost of Discipleship'. He knew that cost first hand when he resisted Hitler and the spread of Nazism and paid for it with his life. He contrasted that cost with what he called 'cheap grace' - forgiveness without repentance, baptism without being Christian, Communion without belief. Today it is still as true as it was in Jesus time: not all his followers are disciples, but all his followers are called to be disciples of the One whose 'yoke is easy and his burden light'.