



Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time June 27, 2010 C

TRUE DISCIPLESHIP MEANS JESUS HAS TOP PRIORITY IN OUR LIVES

The words “journey,” “commitment,” and “discipleship” sum up the message of today’s readings. In the first reading, Elijah bids good-bye to family and to a former way of life to embark on a new journey of commitment and discipleship to God. In the Gospel, Jesus resolutely sets out on a journey to Jerusalem where he will pay the ultimate price for his fidelity to his Father. As he travels, he tells prospective disciples the “cost” they will pay for following him. The second reading points to a journey from “living in the flesh” to “living in the spirit.”

A demanding Gospel

In today’s Gospel, Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem. Luke says, “*Jesus resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem....*” Jerusalem is where Jesus will suffer, die and rise, thereby achieving our salvation. Nothing is going to stop Jesus from “fulfilling his destiny” to go to Jerusalem, just as there is no preventing Gandhi and others like him from doing what they need to do to win liberation for their people. Jesus knows that his entry into Jerusalem will mean rejection, pain and death but he is determined out of a deep sense of *fidelity* to keep walking the path he feels called to walk even if it means accepting suffering and death.

John and James are Jesus’ “front men.” They are sent ahead to get a room for Jesus in the next village. But the next village is a Samaritan town where Jews are not welcome. Such animosity continues to exist in modern day society as between Jews and Palestinians.

John and James are flaming mad at the hostility of the Samaritans. They want Jesus to call down fire from heaven to consume these people. Jesus, being a non-violent person, rejects John and James’ suggestion. Jesus is teaching his disciples that not everyone will welcome him or his message, but that those people are not to be treated with violence. Such message was, however, forgotten by church authorities in the Middle Ages when heretics were tortured and burned at the stake. Also, later in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus praises a Samaritan (the “Good Samaritan”) and holds him up as a model of mercy and compassion (Luke 10:29-35). The disciples will need to learn that not all Samaritans are bad.

Tough responses to three prospective disciples

As they continue on their way, Jesus uses the opportunity to point out the *cost* of following him. It is not a call to a glamorous lifestyle. Rather, it is a call to a radical form of *detachment* from all that might get in the way of our totally *attaching* ourselves to Christ.

When three prospective disciples come up to Jesus as he walks, and announce: “*We’d like to be a disciple of yours,*” Jesus responds:

“*Think about it, foxes have their dens, birds of the sky have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*”

To a second prospect who says he will be ready to follow Jesus after he buries his father, Jesus says:

“*Let the dead bury the dead, you come follow me.*”

To a third one who asks to say first his farewell to his family, Jesus says:

“*No one who sets his hand to plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the Kingdom of God.*”

Wow! What harsh, insensitive words from a man who preaches love. If I were Jesus’ bishop, I would definitely not make him the *Vocation Director* for our diocese. So what are we to make of these harsh and insensitive words of Jesus? Scholars tell us that *Jesus is not saying what he seems to be saying*, that prospective followers must be ready to adopt a homeless lifestyle, that they should not be preoccupied with burying their dead or maintaining family ties. After all, Jesus’ family did have a home in Nazareth. We can also assume that Jesus reverently buried Joseph. Respectful burial of the dead was an important part of Jewish piety (see Tobit 4:3). And we can assume that Jesus enjoyed family gatherings. So what is Jesus implying?

Jesus wants to impart to us that prospective disciples must be ready to put him first before family, home and anything else. Jesus must have first place in the life of a disciple. If, for some reason, a family member tries to get in the way of a disciple’s commitment to Jesus, the disciple must opt for Jesus. Allegiance to Christ is even more important than to one’s spouse. Jesus is not dismissing the love and commitment spouses must have for one another but that it should not be above one’s allegiance to Christ. To do so would make oneself unfit for the Kingdom of God.

“Attachment to the plow” involves a healthy detachment from everyone and everything. We should never become so attached to a person, job or thing that they threaten our attachment to Jesus. Everyone and everything else must be seen in the context of our first and foremost commitment to Jesus.

How will marrying this person impact my relationship with Jesus? Will it help or hurt it? How will taking this job impact my relationship with Jesus? Will it help it or hurt it? Those are the kinds of questions athletes bent on becoming superstars ask. How will such-and-such a decision impact my number one goal?

Jesus is not asking us to break family ties. We assume he had a good relationship with his family and relatives and enjoyed get-togethers with them. But family ties are not his number one priority. His relationship with his Father and the Kingdom are paramount in his mind. When Mary and Joseph lose Jesus in Jerusalem, they are distraught and ask: “How could you do this to us?” He responds: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” Another time, while Jesus is preaching to the crowds, someone comes up to him and says: “Your mother and brothers are here to see you.” Jesus answers: “Who are my mother and brothers?” Mark continues: “And looking around at those sitting in a circle about him, he said, ‘here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is mother, brother and sister to me’” (Mark 3:31-35). Jesus loves his family but his first priority is to God and his Kingdom. And that is what he asks of us. Yes, love your family but make God and his ways our top priority.

When St. Francis of Assisi, rejecting his father’s plea to come home and run the family business, takes off all his clothes in the town square—that is a perfect example of someone living today’s tough Gospel. He is choosing Jesus over family and prosperity. When Thomas More chooses to die rather than show allegiance to King Henry VIII, he is putting God ahead of his prestigious position and ahead of family who wants him to compromise his principles. More’s final words are: “I die the king’s good servant, but God’s first.” More has a very special affection for his family, but allegiance to God is first in his life. That is what Jesus is asking of us today. Yes, cherish your family, love creation, enjoy nice things, but never allow them to get between you and your first love, God.

Reflection question: What presently hinders you from being a more dedicated disciple of Jesus? Attachment to material possessions? Family ties? Fear of what it will cost you?

First Reading

Today’s first reading highlights the main point of the Gospel, namely, that following God and Jesus must have first place in our lives. In the reading, Elijah kills his oxen and burns his plowing equipment to show that his past life (as a farmer) is over. Now he is called to be a prophet in Israel. I wonder how Elijah’s father felt about his son’s symbolic gesture! My guess is that he might have wanted to kick his butt.

Decisions have consequences

One way to connect today’s first and third readings with our lives is to reflect on the consequences of decisions. When Elijah and the disciples make a decision to say “yes” to God, they are saying goodbye or “no” to other things. When a man says his “yes” to a woman, he is saying goodbye or “no” to “playing the field.” When a man in our church says “yes” to being a priest, he is saying goodbye or “no” to marriage. Sometimes we may think that a new “yes” does not involve some other “no’s.” Invariably, it does.

Of course, one can be married and be a farmer and also be a follower of Jesus. But one must live married life and farming life in such a way that it reflects commitment to God and Jesus. One’s marriage and work must, ideally, be imbued with the attitudes and values of Jesus.

Reflection question: Can you name a situation in your life where you are still trying “to leave the door open” even though you have theoretically said “no” to that option or choice?

SENIOR’S PRAYER

*God, grant me the senility to forget the people
I never liked anyway,
and the good fortune to run into the people I do like
and the eyesight to tell the difference.*

Have a blessed week,

