



Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time C September 8, 2019

WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THOSE WHO NEED THEM

The following four pieces in italics are reflections on today's readings by scripture scholar Patricia Sanchez.

Sir Winston Churchill had been asked to address the graduating class of Oxford University. Such addresses are usually offered to edify and encourage those who are preparing to enter a new phase of their lives. At times, invited speakers will share with the graduates some of the circumstances and achievements of their own lives so that those present might be enlightened by the wisdom of their experience. Like Jesus instructing his disciples, Churchill's message was one of perseverance.

*When the British Prime Minister arrived at Oxford, he came with his usual props, a cigar, a cane and a top hat. As Churchill made his way to the podium, those assembled stood and welcomed him with appreciative applause. With a dignity gained from the experience of countless similar situations, he settled the crowd and stood in confidence before his admirers. Removing his cigar and carefully placing his top hat on the podium, Churchill gazed at his waiting audience. Authority rang in his voice as he shouted, "**Never give up!**" Several seconds passed, and the crowd remained hushed, waiting for him to continue. Suddenly, he rose to his toes and repeated: "**Never give up!**" His words thundered in their ears; the silence was deafening. Then Churchill reached for his hat, planted his cigar between his teeth, steadied himself with his cane and left the platform. His commencement address, which is probably one of the shortest and most eloquent ever delivered, was finished.*

*No doubt, there were many subsequent occasions when Churchill's message, "**Never give up!**" would echo in the minds of that graduating class and encourage them to continue on through times of discouragement, to begin again after a misstep or failure and to persist in their efforts despite every obstacle. When these same words echo in our hearts today, what message do they carry for believers in Jesus? Perseverance in the path of discipleship does not mean that we simply plow through life undeterred and undetoured by difficulty. Indeed, and as Jesus warned*

in the gospel, persevering disciples must not only be fully aware of the rigors of commitment, they must also be willing to embrace those rigors and sacrifices as part of the daily gift they are offering to Christ.

*Perhaps the following adaptation of a poem originally entitled "anyway" best describes the staying power or perseverance to which Jesus calls his own. The original version, **which could just as well have been entitled** "Never Give Up," is posted on the wall of Shishu Bhavan, a children's home in Calcutta, India, established by Mother Teresa and run by her order, the Missionaries of Charity.*

Anyway, Never Give Up!

*Discipleship is an unusual undertaking;
the better you become at it,
the more difficult and challenging it will be.
Be a disciple anyway; never give up!
The people you are called to serve may be unlikable,
ungrateful and unimpressed by your dedication.
Love and serve them anyway; never give up!
If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish,
ulterior motives.
Do good anyway; never give up!
The good you do for Christ will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway; never give up!
Honesty, humility and simplicity make you vulnerable.
Be honest, humble and simple anyway; never give up!
What you spend years building may seem insignificant
in the eyes of others;
Build anyway; never give up!
People really need help but may attack you if you help
them.
Help them anyway; never give up!
Give the world the best you have and you may get
kicked in the teeth.
Give the world your best anyway; never give up!*

REFLECTION #2

What are your real priorities?

Pause for a few moments. In your mind's eye, take a sheet of paper and a pencil. Draw a dividing line from top to bottom of the paper. On the left half of the paper, write the numbers from least important, of your

priorities in life. What is your “agenda vitae”? No doubt your list will include those people, things and/ or events which you value above all else—family, friends, faith, marriage, career, education, health, etc. Then on the right half of the paper, estimate how much time and energy you invest, on a given day, in each of your priorities. How do your two lists correspond? Do you spend more time and energy on your most important priorities?

Few of us probably would have listed television as a priority. How then can we justify the hours invested in the “tube”? Most of us probably ranked faith and family among our most precious priorities. Does the daily time allotted to each reflected that preciousness? What do your lists tell you about yourself?

The readings for today’s liturgy also invite us to examine our priorities. In the gospel, Jesus is addressing those who have shown an interest in becoming his disciples. If they would make him and their commitment to him their chief priority, then they should “first sit down and calculate the outlay” (Luke 14:28). “Discipleship is not periodic volunteer work, on one’s own terms and at one’s convenience!” Discipleship is a full time endeavor, requiring the totality of a person’s mind, will, strength and heart. “First sit down and consider” (Luke 14:31), said Jesus, the dire consequences as well as the joys of discipleship.

Understanding that God and his counsel should be the first priority of every believer, the first-century BCE Wisdom author (first reading) reminded his readers to be diligent in their search for his will and his ways.

Paul, in the second reading, is appealing to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Because both men had chosen to make Christ the foremost priority in their lives, they were called to love and value one another in a new way, as brothers in the Lord.

Today, the scriptures call us to “sit down and consider” our priorities. Do they truly reflect who we are as Christians? Do they reveal the decision each of us has made to follow Christ?

REFLECTION #3

Discipleship: A Dear and Costly Grace

French artists Henry Matisse and Auguste Renoir were close friends and frequent companions despite the fact that Renoir was twenty-eight years the senior of Matisse. During the last several years of his life, Renoir was virtually crippled by arthritis; nevertheless, he painted every day and when his fingers were no longer supple enough to hold the brush correctly, he had his wife, Alice, attach the paintbrush to his hand in order to continue his work.

Matisse visited him daily. One day, as he watched his elder friend wincing in excruciating pain with each colorful stroke, he asked, “Auguste, why do you continue to paint when you are in such agony?” Renoir’s response was immediate, “The beauty remains; the pain passes.” Passion for his art empowered Renoir to paint until the day he died. Those who continue to admire the enduring beauty of his smiling portraits, his landscapes, his still life’s of flowers and fruit, will find no trace therein of the pain required to create them. Most will agree that the cost was worth it.

Many will also agree that the cost of being an Olympic or professional athlete is also worth whatever is required to excel. At great personal, economic and emotional cost, young children spend hours a day practicing their skills; they submit to rigorous programs of diet and exercise. Many virtually forego an average childhood in order to spend months at a time away from family and friends at a special facility with expert coaches.

Wise teacher that he was, Jesus advised his disciples that their following of him would also require that they be willing to defray certain costs for the sake of what will remain—a lasting relationship with him and a partnership of shared service for the sake of the kingdom. In today’s Lucan gospel, Jesus detailed some of the costs of discipleship; he invited his own to value their union with him above and before all other unions. He counseled them against that naïve and starry-eyed infatuation which would enter into a commitment to him, uninformed and/or unprepared for what lay ahead. Jesus wanted his own to be sensitive, sensible, sane and sober as to the high personal price of calling themselves his followers. In other words, Jesus was challenging his disciples to forego what Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*The Cost of Discipleship*) described as cheap grace in favor of costly grace. Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor, was executed in a Nazi war camp for his resistance to Hitler.

REFLECTION #4

Cheap and Costly Grace

Grace is the disciple’s inexhaustible treasury, freely bestowed, because the essence of grace is that the account has already been paid, in advance, and through the cross of Jesus. Nevertheless, this grace must be daily appropriated and therein lies the cost. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession; cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus. However, costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price for which the

believer is willing to sell everything he/she has. Costly grace is the gospel which must be lived and preached; it is the gift which must be asked for, the door at which every disciple must knock. Costly grace means following Jesus, aware of and prepared for the pitfalls of discipleship but still willing to meet them and manage them daily.

That Paul had been willing to pay the high cost of discipleship is evident in today's second reading; his association with Christ and the gospel had landed him in prison. Nevertheless, his ministry continued, undaunted and unfettered. Like the first century B.C.E. author of Wisdom (first reading), Paul was content to entrust his freedom, his life and his work to God's inscrutable wisdom. Through his experience of costly grace, he had learned that the pains of the present will pass but the beauty and goodness of God's loving plan will remain forever.

Philemon and the Cost of Discipleship

In the second reading, Paul invites his friend Philemon, a Christian and slave owner, to pay what could be a costly price for allegiance to Christ. Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave who, through his association with Paul, has now become a Christian.

Legally, Onesimus is still a slave but, *spiritually*, he is a free man. In God's eyes, Onesimus is his master's equal. Paul urges Philemon to treat his slave as a brother in Christ. This presents Philemon with a moral dilemma: if he treats Onesimus as a brother, will not his other slaves run away and be baptized so that they can be treated like Onesimus? If, on the other hand, he refuses to do so, will he not be denying Onesimus' Christian status?

We may wonder why Paul did not condemn slavery. Neither did Jesus. But both advocated a type of love that should move any disciple like Philemon to treat slaves as equals and deal with them accordingly. It is sad that it took the church and society such a long time to get Jesus' and Paul's message on the evil of slavery. But then should we be that surprised? If each of us were totally honest, we would have to admit that we sometimes do not treat some people as our *equals* in Christ.

Reflection and Faith-Sharing Questions

1. In today's gospel, Jesus speaks about the cost of discipleship. What does it cost you to be a disciple of Jesus?

2. The daily cross refers to the daily discipline needed to keep our eyes on Jesus and not allow other persons or things to become more important than our allegiance to Christ. What in your life competes or is a threat to your allegiance to Christ? Family? Work? Material things? A particular sport? What sometimes, or often, takes priority over Christ in your life?

3. Can you see how possessions and money can be an obstacle to our relationship with God? If so, how?

4. Most likely, Philemon had a difficult time accepting Onesimus as his slave and then a Christian as his *equal* in Christ. Are there groups of people or individuals that you sometimes look upon as 'less than'? While you may never *say* that so-and-so is not your equal, do you sometimes have a tendency to treat others as less than your equal in Christ?

PRAYER TO RADIATE CHRIST

*Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance
everywhere I go:*

*Flood my soul with your spirit and life;
penetrate and possess my whole being
so utterly that all my life
may only be a radiance of yours.*

*Shine through me and be so in me
that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.*

*Let them look up and see no longer me,
but only Jesus! Amen.*

John Henry Cardinal Newman

Have a blessed week,

