

HOMILY for 23rd SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year C

This Sunday's Gospel reminds us about the careful consideration of the cost & personal sacrifices of being a disciple of Jesus, a Christian on our long journey of faith. Reflecting on it, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

This man got a job with the county highway department painting down the center of the highway. The supervisor told him that he was expected to paint two miles of highway a day, & the man started work the next day. The first day the man painted four miles. The supervisor thought, "Great job!" The next day the man only painted two miles; but the supervisor thought, "Well, it's good enough." But, the third day the man only painted one mile & the boss said, "Is there a problem, sonny?"

The man said, "Well sir, I'm getting farther & farther from the bucket. That's why!"

Anyway, I don't know about you, but this Sunday's Gospel catches me by surprise. Here is what Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father & mother, his wife & his children, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower. Anyone who does not take up his cross & follow me cannot be my disciple." First, this translation of "turning one's back on one's family" is much milder compared to another translation of "hating one's family." Because Jesus never preached the message of hate, even when talking about sinners or enemies. He might tell us to hate sins & love sinners, even our enemies. Second, the message of turning our back on our family might sound a bit weird to us, but that is the cost of being Jesus' followers. In case we missed it somehow, Jesus tried to underline it with a similar message at the end of today's Gospel passage as He said, "Anyone who does not take up his/her cross & follow me cannot be my disciple." In other words, the road of discipleship with Jesus is one full of crosses & lots of personal sacrifices.

If we think that being Jesus' disciples/Christians is easy like a walk in a park, we are fooling ourselves. That is why I think the Church might have given the public wrong impression that being a Christian is fun & trouble free when its ministers tell their congregations empty promises about following Jesus & entertain them with fun music & rock-&-roll like worshipping experiences. Or, some Christians might have mistakenly assumed that Jesus will take care of all their problems & they have nothing to worry about. That is why these Christians might have fallen away from Jesus & the Church when they face tough time. Today Jesus warns us & all Christians to think long & hard about the decision of following Jesus like a manager of a construction project or a king facing an impending battle would do before beginning it. Otherwise, we would look like a fool or face a terrible disappointment once it is under way. So, why is it so tough for someone not to complete the journey of discipleship with Jesus? What are some of the crosses that Jesus wants us to carry as His disciples?

First, we are required to love God with all our hearts, minds, & souls; & love our neighbors as ourselves. We are also challenged to love our enemies & reconcile with one another. Those requirements might sound simple; but they are very difficult for us to practice daily. For example, in terms of loving God with every fiber of our being, some Christians might not have lived up to it & forgotten about God when they face tough time. That is why the biggest religious group in the world is one of the fallen-away Christians, not atheists. As you can see, these former Christians have miscalculated their journey with Jesus & would love Him only when it is convenient, or when everything goes well for them. That is why Abraham is a great role model for us on how someone should love God above everything else on earth. Abraham

was willing to sacrifice his one & only son Isaac to God as he tried to prove how much he loved God. In terms of loving one's neighbors as oneself, most Christians have not lived up to it because they usually care only about themselves & their benefits. We have seen many political & church leaders have failed to love their neighbors even though they might have shown a nice public image of loving God or being a devout Christian. Saints are the only people who had truly loved God & their neighbors by following an extraordinary Christian lifestyle & dedicated service to the poor & the social outcast. Some of the saints have even pushed themselves to love their enemies as Jesus has shown them on the Cross.

If we thought that those Commandments of love are too tough for us to practice daily, Jesus has one more hoop for us to jump through in order to be His disciples. That challenge is spelled out for us at the end of this Sunday's Gospel as following, "...None of you can be my disciple if he/she does not renounce all his/her possessions." So, Jesus believed that we must detach ourselves from the earthly world if we would like to be His disciples. Once Jesus met a young man who apparently wanted to know how he could inherit the eternal life, He told him to practice the two Commandments of love. Surprisingly, the young man told Jesus that he had followed those Commandments religiously since his childhood. Then, Jesus suggested to him to get rid of all his possessions if he wanted to be perfect or one hundred percent sure of inheriting eternal life. We were told that the young man left Jesus looking sad because he had lots of possessions & could not separate himself from them. He failed the final test of Jesus' discipleship as he decided to cling on to his worldly possessions instead of Jesus.

Why would worldly possessions be such a big hurdle to hold someone back from following Jesus? This Sunday's First Reading tells us the reason for it as following, "...For the corruptible body burdens the soul & the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns." So, the Book of Wisdom reminds us that our souls & minds are burdened by our corruptible bodies & all the earthen concerns. Those concerns are our daily basic necessities, human relationships, future ambitions, & so on. If we do not detach ourselves from worldly possessions, power, fame, & pleasures, we would get distracted easily & lose our focus on following Jesus & achieving eternal life for that matter. That is why Jesus once said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven & achieve eternal life. That is why it is sad for me to see some wealthy & powerful folks, especially politicians, who try to fool the public to think that they are good Christians while trying to hang on to their worldly possessions & earthly power. Jesus told us that we could not serve 2 masters like that. So, if we see our Church & political leaders want to make lots of money & hang on to this world, we could tell for sure that they would not be good Christians & care about inheriting eternal life. We should stop letting those fake Christians fool us with their dubious Christian lifestyle.

My dear brothers & sisters, how committed are you to be Jesus' disciples? Are you willing to take up your daily crosses & make personal sacrifices for the sake of Jesus' mission of salvation? We are asked to love God with all our hearts & minds & love our neighbors as ourselves. Furthermore, we need to detach ourselves from this world & focus our thoughts & dreams on the Kingdom of Heaven. When we are able to do that, we are ready to walk with Jesus on the journey of the Cross all the way to the end. And He will surely reward us abundantly on the Last Day. Otherwise, we might quit half way through the journey & fail to complete the mission of salvation that He left behind for us.