

Putting First Things First

Homily for 23rd Sunday Ordinary Time
September 4th 2022

Today's Gospel reading is one of the most challenging of all Jesus' sayings. Here he enjoins those who would be his disciples:

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 disciple¹

We can hear these words and recoil from them. What do you mean Jesus? I cannot be your disciple unless I hate my mother, father, siblings and even my very life. Now maybe if you are a teenager you can say "hey Jesus I resonate with what you are saying. Hating mom, dad, my brother and sister and even my every life, I know what you are talking about".

But of course when we think about this carefully Jesus cannot mean what he seems to mean in reading these verses literally. In order to get the point of this teaching we need to understand that Jesus is using a form of exaggerated speech, called hyperbole. What he is really getting at is the following. If we are going to be his students, if we are going to be men and women, teenagers and children who come under his instruction, - what it means to be a disciple - we have to put first things first, and this means that he has to come before everyone else, including those people who are most important to us our family and our own lives.

Take a minute to think about this with me. In a Jewish context, after love for God the very next thing the Ten Commandments admonishes is to honour one's father and mother. Jews were not to hate their parents but to respect and revere them. If this is so, how can Jesus say what he does in this verse? Here is the point, he can only be worthy of being placed first in our lives if he is even more important than family, and our own lives. He is only worthy of being placed first, if in fact he is more than a man but God himself.

With this in mind, look at the first verse from today's Gospel:

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them.

What is St Luke showing us here? There were thousands of people intrigued by Jesus and interested in being with the company of those who were inspired by him. We are also told they were travelling with him. Where were they travelling to?

Back in Luke 9:51 were are told:

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Lk 14:26). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem”

In other words Jesus is travelling to the Cross where he will be lifted up in suffering before he will in the ascension be taken up to heaven. So he wants this multitude who are accompanying him to know this isn't a happy go lucky parade that I am leading. No, I am calling you to a radical life where I want you to assess what it means to put me before anything or anyone else.

So imagine how people must have responded to this? Do you hear what he is saying, the man from Galilee is challenging us to give him our foremost commitment and allegiance. We are even to be willing to die for him so we can be his disciples. How crazy! And the same thing is true today..... How can Jesus ask of us to put him first unequivocally?

And of course this is the point, we have to be willing to count the cost. That is why he tells two parables about cost, one is focused on a tower that would be placed in a vineyard, and the other about waging war. Jesus doesn't want from us blind allegiance but a considered decision of what it will mean to be his disciple.

This then brings the passage right to where we are today and ask: Why is it worth taking Jesus' challenge seriously? These words are only worth considering if Jesus is who he claims to be.

Many centuries ago Jesus said to Catherine of Sienna that she too was called to put first things first.

Do you know daughter who you are, and who I am? If you know these two things you will be blessed. You are she who is not; whereas I am he who is.

For us moderns, this kind of extreme language is something we find hard to fathom. What Jesus is presenting here sound like "religious fanaticism." Religion is a fine thing, says this mindset, but let's not overdo it. But that is exactly what the devil wants: a little religion, but not too much; a mild dose of it that can act like an antidote to the real thing. Sincere, passionate atheism is dangerous to the devil because it puts the God question front and center, even though it gives the wrong answer to it. Atheists have a dangerously high conversion rate. So do great sinners, whose passion makes them great saints when it is turned around. It takes less to turn a car around that is traveling fast in the wrong direction than to start up a car that is stuck.

Cowpox is a virus that is very similar to smallpox, and it acts as a vaccine against smallpox. A little religion is like a vaccine against the thing that is deadly to the devil: absolute, infinite, unlimited, nonnegotiable loyalty to Jesus Christ as our Lord and God and Savior and as the whole meaning of our lives and our whole hope of happiness and joy. Christ warns us against religious vaccination. His advertisement is not: "Add me to your life, add me to your list of friends on Facebook." Rather, his advertisement is: "If you will follow me, you must be prepared to give up anything and everything for me. I can only be either everything or nothing to you, not something in between."

This is what the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon is declaring too. He is counselling us to make the distinction between things of heaven and things of earth, and saying that true wisdom is to discriminate between the things of earth that are temporary, temporal, even our own bodies which will pass away. The body's good, but it's earthly. It is perishable. It will pass away until the resurrection on the last day. By contrast, the Holy Spirit (the wisdom of God) is eternal, is everlasting. And so what Wisdom is doing is saying we need to choose the things of heaven over the stuff of earth. We need to remember that there are greater things in the heavens that we can imagine. But here is the challenge captured in this one verse:

**for a perishable body weighs down the soul,
and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind.²**

In other words, this material, physical existence can so consume us that we have trouble seeing or believing what Jesus teaches us today. All of the challenges that are the burdens of this earthy tent can eclipse what matters most, to put first things first, that is to put Jesus before mom, dad, brother, sister or myself.

In conclusion let me say this in quoting the Christian Philosopher Peter Kreeft:

Jesus is not a tyrant; he is the world's greatest psychologist. He knows the secret of happiness and of misery, of freedom and slavery. For our own good he warns us against worshipping our idols, the most common and hidden one being ourselves. Even Jesus did not worship himself; he worshiped his Father. The persons of the Trinity are totally unselfish, and God only asks us to practice what he himself practices: self-forgetful, self-giving love. Jesus preaches only what he practices, and he asks us to practice only what we preach. If we preach Jesus, if we say we are Christians, that's the deal. Give him everything. Trust him with everything. Your life, your death, your sanity, your happiness, your hope both for this life and for the next, your financial life, your home life, your recreational life, your body, your mind, your soul, your feelings, your freedom, your rights, your time, your past, your future, your present. Give it to him now, with no conditions, no strings attached, no footnotes or fine print. Say and mean, "Thy will be done," and then don't duck. Do it now, in the next sixty seconds. I dare you. He dares you.³

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Wis 9:15). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ Kreeft, Peter. *Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle C)* (p. 629). Word On Fire. Kindle Edition.