

Costly Christian Discipleship

23rd Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 8 Sept. 2019 – Nativity of Our Blessed Mother, Mary
Readings: Wis 9:13-18b; Philem 9-10,12-17; Lk 14:25-33

“No one can be my disciple unless one gives up all one’s possessions” (Lk)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The theme of today’s readings is discipleship, which the gospel passage clearly develops. However, to find connections of the other two readings to the discipleship-theme is not very easy. So, it’s best to begin with the gospel passage stressing Jesus’ call for discipleship with a caution about its cost. Following Jesus is no mean task, which demands surrender of every-*one* (persons) and every-*thing* (possessions) that one cherishes most and clings to. Note that this passage does *not* specifically refer to the call of the Twelve apostles since the passage begins with: “*Great crowds* accompanied Jesus and he turned and spoke to *them...*” Therefore, this passage refers to the *universal call* to discipleship addressed to *all Christians*—not only religious, priests, nuns, missionaries, etc.
2. Does Jesus seriously mean that his disciples must “*hate* father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters?” This cannot be literally true since Jesus teaches us to love our foes, too! Interpreting this passage literally is akin to misunderstanding the nature of Semitic idiom. Jesus’ message is always one of love and so the word ‘*hate*’ here refers to subordinating all human loves to the supreme Source of Love – God! If one truly loves God, then all other loves will fade into insignificance, fall into proper place, and will enrich those who relate to God and to all others in genuine love. The dynamics of Christian discipleship is very similar to that of Christian matrimony. When two mature youth ‘fall in love’ they eventually evaluate whether they will be able to ‘rise in love’ with each spouse supporting the other and helping the other to grow. After this evaluation, they take a decision to say ‘*Yes*’ to each other in the sacrament of matrimony. Thereafter, their love continues to grow and blossom to the extent that they are able to give of themselves to each other in self-sacrificial love, which, ironically, also turns out to be self-fulfilling. Love makes a total claim on the lover and the beloved and they are ready to pay any price.
3. Jesus provides two examples of how one must calculate the cost before embarking upon a venture of singular significance. For example, if one is to build a tower or is to win a war, one must realistically budget and plan economic, material and personnel resources or else, should one face failure or defeat, one will become the laughing stock of all. Major projects which involve immense investment should never be taken lightly. So it is with discipleship, which involves every bit of one’s whole being. Jesus concludes his invitation without mincing words. He says pointedly: “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce *all* that s/he has cannot be my disciple.”

Connecting the 1st reading to the theme: The Book of Wisdom—probably the last book of the First Testament—is neither written in the sacred language (Hebrew) nor in the holy land (Palestine); but written in Greek and addressed to the Jewish diaspora, exhorting them to live according to the demands of being a covenantal people. The first two rhetorical questions are posed

to stress that God's mind and plans are inscrutable to the fickle, finite minds of mortal human beings. "The reasoning of mortals is worthless" (v.14). The "earthy tent" imagery is indicative of a dichotomous, Platonic worldview where the 'mind' (soul) seems imprisoned by the earthen tent (body). But, thanks to God who reveals Godself to us, we have the 'holy spirit' who enables us to decipher the "paths" that God chooses and charts for us. So, this idea could be connected to the discipleship theme stressing on the wisdom, the discernment and the daring decision to say "Yes" to God's call—to follow God's designs and dreams for you and me.

Connecting the 2nd reading to the theme: The passage from Paul's letter to Philemon—the shortest of his letters, and yet the most personal and poignant—contains an appeal from one disciple (Paul) to another disciple (Philemon). In the days when slavery was accepted as a social practice, Philemon was a rather wealthy 'convert' to Christianity from Colossae who owned a slave, Onesimus, who fled from slavery and came to Rome, met Paul, and was converted to Christianity. Aware that all are one in Christ Jesus (see Gal 3:28; 4:6-7), Paul requests Philemon to reinstate Onesimus—whom he loves as "my own heart" (v.12) and as "beloved brother" (v.16)—as his brother, too. So, instead of two disciple-brothers [Paul and Philemon], there will now be three! Onesimus too, like Paul and Philemon, will serve the Lord in Christian discipleship.

Three Current Concerns:

The Cross and Cost Concern: Christian discipleship is not some 'cheap career' but a priceless 'profession' and 'possession' that makes disciples daringly say "Yes", disposing off everything to profess Christ and possess Him, alone. In a world that prizes well-paid professions and well-earned possessions, am I ready to bear the cost, bear the cross?

The Discernment Concern: Before building a tower and waging war, beware! *Discern*, discuss, decide! In *Christus Vivit*, n.250, Pope Francis says: "The first thing we need to discern and discover is this: Jesus wants to be a friend to every young person. This discernment is the basis of all else." Do I/we keep discernment as the basis for all my/our decisions in life?

Marian Devotion and Discipleship: Though the Sunday readings take precedence over the Marian readings for what is normally celebrated today [Sept. 8] as the 'Birthday of our Blessed Mother, Mary', she can be our model of discipleship. She follows her Son, Jesus, all through the *Via Crucis* and beyond. Mary was always ready to bear the cost of discipleship.

In Lighter Vein:

African aboriginals have an ingenious way of trapping monkeys. They carve out a small cavity in the bark of a tree just big enough for a monkey to slip his hand in. Then, they fill the cavity with groundnuts – or 'monkey nuts', as we call them – and lie in wait. Soon, curious monkeys come to investigate. They smell the groundnuts and sure enough one of them squeezes his hand through the cavity to grab the nuts. But the cavity isn't big enough for the monkey to pull out his clenched fist. The monkey stupidly refuses to open his clenched fist and let go of the nuts. He's trapped. How often, like a monkey, do I refuse to let go of trifles and lose Life in the bargain?

Reflection: The most beautiful things of life are obtained not by grabbing but by giving. While monkeys get entrapped with peanuts, let us 'let go' and let God take the upper hand. Jesus calls us to a freedom that comes from following Him faithfully, costly though this discipleship be.
