

Commentary to the 23th Sunday In Ordinary Time (C)



None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all of his possessions. These are quite uncompromising words from Our Lord in the extract from the Gospels presented to us today. And one really wonders what to make of them.

It would be easy to spiritualise the words and say that, of course, one needs material possessions but Jesus is telling us not to do without them but simply not to be too preoccupied with them.

And I suppose that's how we would ordinarily take this saying of Jesus. But one can't help being dissatisfied with that way of looking at the problem. Because if Jesus had wanted to water down his words and give them a different meaning then surely he would have taken the trouble to be clearer in the first place.

It is a good principle to take the text as it is actually written, particularly if it is a difficult text. The tendency of any scribe or reporter is to make the words he is reporting clearer and more directly

understandable. But if then the text remains difficult then it usually means that it was difficult in the first place and therefore is probably an original saying of Jesus.

What we are talking about here is generally regarded as the first level of interpretation and it is done by the author, in this case St Luke if he is the one who heard Jesus speak these words in the first place.

What Luke writes is: None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all of his possessions. And that's pretty unequivocal. He surely must have heard Jesus say it or reported other people in the Early Church who heard the Lord say this very thing.

But even if these actually are Jesus' actual words we are still left with the problem of what to make of them.

Over the centuries a number of great saints have taken these words and others like them and done precisely what Jesus asks. They have literally given up their possessions and followed the Lord. In the early days they most often went into the desert to be alone with God. The best example of this is St Anthony the Great, also known as Anthony of the Desert, the first and greatest hermit.

St Anthony was listening to the priest proclaiming the Gospel and when he heard the words Jesus addressed to the rich young man: Go sell everything you have and follow me. These are very similar words to the ones in today's Gospel and Anthony took them literally and upped and left everything and retired to the desert. He lived there for many years and had an impressive number of followers who persisted in bothering him, as he saw it.

The first monks were mostly hermits like St Anthony but as the centuries moved on it tended to be that those who wished to follow Christ in a radical way grouped together in monasteries. This continues today to be the norm although there are now many communities with a wide range of emphases although all aiming to follow Christ in a radical way.

I suppose by now you are wondering if I am going to suggest that we all pack up now and retire to a monastery? Well, don't knock it. For some this is the only way. I myself haven't actually entered a monastery as such but I do belong to a religious community which is dedicated to proclaiming the

Gospel. I have found that for me personally this is the only satisfactory way of following Christ.

Though the religious life is certainly for some the best way of following the Lord it is not the only way. Each one of us must find our own way of authentically following Jesus and it will mean different things for different people.

Whatever our state in life the challenge of following Jesus is laid before us.

Even given a decision to follow Jesus in a radical way we are still left with the question: What does Christ mean when he says, None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all of his possessions? The question won't go away. It demands an answer. It is a question each of us has to work on.

Clearly material possessions can be an impediment to following the Gospel —Christ certainly thinks so! But there again, we live in the world and we have to provide for our families. Providing them not only with the necessities of life but also with a certain quality of life that enables them to flourish as human beings. And by this we include the whole package, a decent home, proper education, ability to travel and a necessary amount of leisure and personal interests —all of which require financing.

But this doesn't mean that we can't live simply. And surely a certain simplicity of life is an important hallmark of the Christian. Enjoyment and pleasure in material things, such as a new car, is one thing but ostentation and flaunting one's possessions is quite another and cannot ever be regarded as compatible with the Christian life.

We have also to be constantly aware that we do not become so engrossed in the material world that we forget to appreciate the things of the Spirit. It is so easy for the one to block out the other. A simple area in which to observe the interaction between the material and the spiritual is at mealtimes. We can become so preoccupied with the preparation and enjoyment of wonderful food that we forget to thank the Lord for it.

Or if we have visitors round we can become so absorbed in their company that we forget to notice that half the conversation is taken up with complaining about the troublesome family down the road.

Another important hallmark of an authentic Christian life that is relevant here would be a concern for the poor. I don't believe it is really sufficient to salve one's conscience in this regard by periodic handouts to various charities. There has to be direct involvement with the poor. We are talking here about more than just generosity, for in life it is surely authentic relationships that matter most.

A particular question that arises here is whether our Western lifestyle is carried on at the expense of the poor in other parts of the globe. It is our clear Christian duty to ensure that we do not become implicated in the covert exploitation of others. Reading the labels in the supermarket is one easy place to start with this one; but it is only, of course, a beginning.

These are just one or two little digressions on this theme. But again and again we come up against this unequivocal injunction of Jesus: None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all of his possessions. We are again and again faced with the real challenge of these words.

And perhaps that's just as it should be. For whether we are rich or poor the attachment to material possessions is a real temptation. We should in our prayer time frequently meditate on these words and ask ourselves what does Jesus mean for me now. We ought to regularly face the challenge and experience the discomfort that these words involve and make some personal decisions accordingly.

In meditating on this text we should not ignore the two parables that precede it. There is one about laying the foundations necessary to build a tower in order to ensure it won't collapse. If our intended destination is eternal life with God then we must be sure to lay the appropriate foundations here and now and these foundations are certainly not material ones.

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