

23rd Sunday (Cycle C)

(Wis 9:13-18: Phlm 9-10,12-17; Luke 14:25-33)

We all hate someone who tells us an elaborate story and then can't remember the punch line. I remember a story I heard many years ago about a famous philosopher who had reached the age of 90 and his friends threw a big birthday party for him; there was a large cake with many candles (probably not 90) and with the inscription (in Latin): "For 90 years completed, congratulations!" But one of his philosopher buddies had bribed the decorator to add the words, "Quid ad aeternitatem?"--"What is this compared to eternity?" There's more to the story, but I can't remember it. The point I want to make relates to today's gospel and the difficult sayings therein.

What are these difficult sayings? One has to do with hating father & mother, wife & children, brothers & sisters, and even one's own life. Another has to do with carrying one's own cross. And the third one is about renouncing all one's possessions. These are hard sayings. One rich man who wanted to follow Jesus turned away after hearing the one about renouncing his

possessions.

But Jesus is totally serious about these things; each of these sayings is prefaced with "unless" and concludes with "you cannot be my disciple." Thus decision is unavoidable. The seriousness is heightened by the two parables, about the would-be tower builder and the king facing an enemy. Let the would-be disciple take note of the difficulties and take them into account in reaching a decision.

So it's really being between a rock and a hard place. It's either "hold on to what you have" (but then "you can't be my disciple") or "be my disciple" (but then renounce everything else). And remember, these words are not directed not just to the people in robes in the choir stalls; they are directed also to all of you people out there.

But this is where the "quid ad aeternitatem" comes in. This call to renouncing our own life has meaning when we measure it against eternity. As Christians who need to live our lives here and now, we do not too often (perhaps not often enough) remember that it is only in the light of eternity, our eternal calling, what God has destined us for, that our lives have their deepest meaning.

But, in practice, how do we do these things? Do we step out of everything but our clothing, as St. Francis did? Christian tradition, even as seen in some of the greatest saints, tells us this is not the way.

First, let us look at that word "hate." Even in English it is not always intended in strictest rigor. For example, do you really hate me because I don't remember the punch line to the story I told at the beginning? As for the gospel saying, is God, who says "Honor your father and your mother," now telling us to hate them? So already we know there is a problem.

One way to approach it is to note all the ways in which Scripture uses the word for "hate." I started to look up in a Hebrew concordance all the OT passages in which sana', the Hebrew word for "hate," appears. Then I thought, "Why do things the hard way?" and I switched to the English concordance. At once I discovered that there are a number of passages in which sana' appears but is not translated "hate" in English, but with a much weaker word--the translators recognized, from the context, that "hate" really was not intended. So, for example, we all know the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah--how Jacob

worked 7 years for Rachel as his wife but Laban gave him Leah instead. In spite of this disappointment, Jacob obviously did not hate Leah--after all, she bore him six sons and a daughter. But the Hebrew says, "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he caused her to conceive"--where the English translations have, "When the Lord saw Leah was unloved ..." So also when Samson wagers with his Philistine in-laws that they can't solve the riddle he proposed to them, they enlist the aid of his wife. Lying beside him in bed she says, "It is clear that you hate me, since you won't tell me the answer to your riddle." What she is saying, in effect, is "You are acting as though you do not love me because you prefer to keep your secret rather than reveal it to me." And this captures pretty well the meaning we have in the gospel: it means to set priorities without regard to what other loves (family, life, possessions) would dictate.

If we want to see this put into practice, we can look at the life of St. Thomas More. It was clear to him that he could not subscribe to the oath of supremacy and still be faithful to his Christian conscience--i.e., to be a disciple of Jesus. He lost his position at court, much of his

source of income, was confined to the Tower of London. His family could not understand why he stood fast, especially since many of the bishops had succumbed. His wife, in particular, pleaded with him. She may have echoed the sentiments of Samson's wife, "you are acting as though you do not love me." Ultimately, as we know, he lost his life, too. In all of this St. Thomas More is living example of today's gospel, with reference to his family, to bearing the cross, to his possessions, to his life.

These and other examples allow us to rephrase the gospel message: your priority must be to be a disciple of Jesus and all other things must be regarded in the light of this priority. Sometimes we can exercise this priority with unselfish love toward others, as when St. Paul, in today's second reading, asks Philemon to transfer Onesimos' service from himself to Paul, or when one wishes to suffer in place of a loved one.

It is unlikely that any of us will be called to choose between life and death in the following of Jesus. But there are other choices that may face us. Are we so wedded to our own pleasures or to the affection of another person that we are tempted to transgress God's law for it's sake? Are

we so attached to possessions or the acquiring of new things (including power, popularity) that we are tempted to transgress God's law for it's sake? Then it is that we need to remember the words: "unless you (hate, renounce)... you cannot be my disciple." but along with this, we must remember that the following of Jesus is not for this life alone. That is when the question "Quid ad aeternitatem--what is this compared to eternity?" is appropriate. To those who give the right answer we can apply the words of that beautiful psalm:

I keep the LORD always before me;
with the Lord at my right, I shall never be
shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad, my soul rejoices;
my body also dwells secure,
For you will not abandon me to Sheol,
nor let your faithful servant see the pit.
You will show me the path to life,
abounding joy in your presence,
the delights at your right hand forever.
(Psalm 16:8"11)