

## Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle C

Wis 9: 13-18  
Psalm 90  
Phil 9: 10,12-17  
Lk 14: 25-33

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Today's readings contain more than a few shockers. Most of us are shocked to hear that the apostle Paul simply took slavery for granted and did not question its moral stature. In his letter to Philemon he instructs the slave owner, Philemon, to accept back his slave, Onesimus, who has evidently run away and ended up in prison with Paul. We don't know all the details. Had he stolen from his slave master? Had he simply run away? Did Paul hope that Philemon would free Onesimus upon his return? This is one of the most personal of all of Paul's letters written to an individual instead of a community. The apostle is an old man. He is in prison. Notice how selfless Paul's attitude is considering the circumstances of his life. Although he had adopted Onesimus as a son and had come to depend on him, Paul is willing to part with him because of his own sense of justice. We might expect him to be embittered after dedicating so many years of his life to promoting the Gospel. How easy it is for us to be discouraged and angry after trying to live a good, honest life! Why is it that we have so little to show for our dedication and sacrifices compared to neighbors, friends and associates who quite frankly have been more self-indulgent? We might do well to remember here the words of St. Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic who is reported to have prayed: "If this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder that you have so few!" Yet Paul stands unshaken and determined despite his circumstances of imprisonment and is more confident than ever in the Lord's love and protection. The most difficult thing for some of us to get our heads around is how Paul the great apostle and inspired writer could have accepted slavery uncritically. We presume that he should have condemned slavery as simply wrong and immoral.

There is an important lesson to be learned here – our rather simplistic understandings of Sacred Scripture. Our faith is at risk when we settle for the child-like notions we were taught about the Bible and other religious questions. Today's second reading challenges any one of us who have been tempted to settle for an overly simplistic reading of Sacred Scripture in the manner that is commonplace among some fundamentalist Christians. Many of us quite frankly need to read and study more about how to interpret Scripture and reconcile difficult passages that strike us as overly ambiguous, contradictory or quite simply wrong.

Today's Gospel also defies our simplistic notions about Jesus and his demands. We sometimes presume uncritically that following Jesus is no different than being a good

American. We should love God, country, family and apple pie. It is shocking to hear Jesus use such harsh language to describe the cost of discipleship: “if anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Most Christians are stunned to hear these words from the mouth of Jesus. Somehow we manage to tune them out when they are proclaimed at Mass. It seems inconceivable that Jesus would say such a thing. When a particular phrase shocks us in the Gospel we need to stop and pay attention. What is Jesus saying? What does he mean? He clearly was a devout Jew who took seriously the obligation to obey the Decalogue including the commandment to “honor father and mother.” He certainly loved his parents Mary and Joseph. Yet a very early episode stands out at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel where Jesus gets lost in the Temple as a twelve year old making his parents worried sick. When they inquire, “Why have you done this to us?” Jesus replies almost flippantly, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Jesus teaches us a powerful lesson that is so sobering for parents to hear. Your children’s first loyalty and love is owed to God and not to your plans and dreams for them.

Perhaps the greatest witness to this teaching in recent times is the Lutheran pastor, theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote these words in *The Cost of Discipleship* shortly before he was put to death by the Nazis in 1945 because of his resistance to the Nazi movement and his subversive work in the underground Church:

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field: for its sake a man gladly goes and sells all that he has; it is the pearl of great value. For it the merchant sells all his goods; it is the kingdom of Christ. Therefore the man plucks out his eye which is an occasion of sin; it is the call of Jesus Christ. Hearing it, the disciple leaves his nets and follows. Costly grace is the Gospel that must ever be sought....It is costly because it calls for obedience; it is grace because it calls for obedience to Jesus Christ; it is costly because it may cost a man his life. [Excerpt from R. Coles, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, An Introduction*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 54-55]

Bonhoeffer understood the meaning of today’s Gospel. He could not simply play it safe by preaching what people wanted to hear from a German pastor who was expected to be loyal and patriotic to the government. We are in the midst of a fierce battle of words between Republicans and Democrats. The rhetoric has come to a deafening pitch this past week with the Republican convention in New York City. It is hard quite frankly not to fall back on our own biases and ideologies as we decide which candidate will best foster peace, justice and well-being for the majority of our nation’s citizens. The temptation will be great to fall back onto old blind loyalties and prejudices: “Democrats are weak, stand for big government and will raise taxes”; “Republicans are war mongers and favor the rich and big business.” Many of us resent the sound bytes taken out of context and the twisting of facts that are commonplace on political ads and even in popular movies that present themselves as documentaries like Michael Moore’s controversial “Fahrenheit 9/11.” The Book of Wisdom reminds us: “the deliberations of mortals are timid, and unsure are our plans.” Today’s readings are a powerful reminder that however admirable is the virtue of loyalty (to family, friends, company, political

party), it is not an ultimate value, unless it is understood as loyalty to God and the kingdom of God. Our allegiance must be first and foremost to God whose kingdom is based on truth, love, liberty and justice for all !!

Jesus is not knocking family life or loyalty to family and friends, nor patriotism. He is rather challenging our sense of priorities. We owe obedience first and foremost to the kingdom of God. The first reading is a sober reminder of how much we need God's wisdom and counsel to discern the truth in the midst of so many competing voices and partial truths. There is simply no easy way to be a disciple of Jesus. There is no short cut. The cost of discipleship is never cheap but demands calculation to make sure we have enough resources for its completion. The demands of discipleship are no guarantee of pain free marriages and prosperity. They promise instead eternal life and a deep peace and calm that no calamity in this world need shake.