

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRIST

In this Sunday's Gospel, Christ gives a surprising and difficult challenge to all his followers, not just his Apostles and to all those who were listening to him talk about the good news of salvation, but to his followers down through the centuries until the end of time. He begins first by once again explaining to his followers that "He must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised." This was not the first time he predicted his future. He spoke of this many times in different ways and each time the result was always the same - total disbelief. Such a thing seemed to be totally impossible. He was loved by so many people! Just how could they all turn against him so radically? Perhaps it was understandable how the leaders could grow to truly hate him - he was blunt with them and never minced his words with them. Whenever they tried to trap him, they always got the short end of the stick, and were silently ridiculed by all those standing around listening with hidden grins on their faces.

But this time Christ adds something to this prediction which certainly must have startled his hearers. He gives each of them a challenge, a challenge which on the surface made little sense to them and was totally unexpected. Looking at each of them with piercing eyes, he says: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." This simply did not compute with them. They all were suddenly at a loss for words. They just didn't know how to ask him to explain exactly what he meant. All they could think was that to follow him was to live a life of pain, of agony, of misery and sorrow, all of which was so contrary to what Christ was always preaching. In the Gospel of Matthew, we find something of an explanation when Christ says: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light."

Just how does one put all this together today two thousand years later? For the past couple of Sundays, we have heard Christ speaking, telling his Apostles and disciples what he really expects of them. The picture he paints is not exactly rosy by any means. Note that in today's Gospel Christ begins by telling them what he is to expect in the near future: rejection, persecution and death. Note also that he ends by telling them of his resurrection! That simply went over the heads of his disciples for such a thing just was impossible in their thinking. Yet, Christ is assuring them that it will all end in total victory, total happiness, total joy. Christ is implying that his followers can expect nothing less than what he himself will endure. In a word, in speaking of each of his followers carrying a cross he is defining the prime element which makes one his disciple, that to be a Christian means carrying a cross as he did.

Carrying a "daily cross" does not mean the daily headaches, disappointments, worries and anxieties that make up the warp and woof of life. Rather, Christ is referring to major challenges to loyalty, even actual persecution, something certainly unlikely to happen in our country. However, defend the life of an unborn child and then feel the wrath and hatred of those who will put you down and try to make you out as completely out of step with modern day living! There are many ways in which many in our country who are totally against God

want God to be out of our country's life completely. Persecution comes in many forms. What Christ is talking about in our day and for all time is a steadfast loyalty to Himself and to a definite way of life. This must be the hallmark of a Catholic, of any Christian.

Today like it or not, such loyalty is being tested by an unwritten doctrine of "consumerism." Just about all experts who have tried to explain our present economic mess have all blamed it on greed! Corporate Greed! Individual greed! Everyone trying to make a fast buck the easy way. All they could see was that in their minds it was possible to have it all right now. Get a larger home whether one needs it or not; drive that big SUV and let everyone see you made it! And of course one just had to have the latest Apple product, the latest Blackberry, etc, etc, etc. And one can only imagine the pressure many a parent was under to get the latest for their child or children! The real tragedy of it all is the fact that normally very shrewd investors, stock market experts, bank managers, insurance executives - the list seems endless - all to a man never foresaw the consequences of their actions. Looking back, they now see how they really didn't want to see. Consumerism infected not just the money people but everyone, and not just in our country but worldwide, a raging infestation of greed reaching to all levels with no exception. And now, just look at the consequences, the personal devastation of human lives, the crushing effects on so many proud psyches, the realization that bailouts are more stop-gap measures than cures. And the one question which will always remain unanswered, when will it all end?

Through all these very tough economic times and still ongoing conditions with few answers, loyalty to Christ is almost never in the forefront. Yes greed was wrong, yet since so many are seemingly making millions with it, it just might be OK becomes a way of thinking, even a habit of thinking the wrong way. One's faith was and still is indeed severely tried with the result that many slowly give it up. Trusting in God is simply not the right answer, yet is there really any other true answer? any other true way?

Now is the time to finally turn back to the Lord, a time to reflect on one's spiritual needs which have fallen so much into the background. One must start with one definite faith conclusion, namely that God has never at any time given up on us, given up on me! But how does one go about making this happen? making this become the cornerstone of our weakened faith? It starts with prayer, an open and honest communication in one's own words with their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This takes a certain amount of humility, but in no way does it mean one must grovel before their Lord and God. That is not what God wants; in no way! We all have dignity whether we realize it or not and it is with dignity that one must face their Lord and God and admit from their heart that they have goofed it all up. And then one must also admit from their heart that somehow their true dignity is still there and that God does see this; after all, that dignity was originally given to us by God Himself.

This is a start. The conclusion and end is down the road a ways but the time will come when it will become obvious and seen. With God at one's side, there is nothing that can keep him away unless we turn away first. But even then, he will run after us as that Hound of Heaven described by Francis Thompson long ago. God must not just be a part of our individual lives, but also a part of our family's life. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst" says the Lord. It is through true humility that one grows in faith and love as well as a real person.

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