

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
4th September 2022 - 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year C): 1st: Wisdom 9:13-18. Psalm: 89:3-6,12-14,17. 2nd: Philemon 9-10,12-17.

Gospel: Luke 14:25-33.

I'm sure most of us were brought up not to hate anyone. Not necessarily to like them, but not to hate them. So some parts of today's gospel can present us with a problem of interpretation, esp. the opening verses about hating the family. What is meant by hating your own family? So often, whatever happens within families we hear 'blood is thicker than water.'

Or the other question raised by the gospel: does every follower of Jesus have to give away everything, including the very last penny?

Are we to take these injunctions literally? Or are they a device of the preacher's art, who presents the hearers with a simple either/or option, and who does not hesitate to exaggerate for effect, or to drive a message home?

The first rule in biblical interpretation is to compare the text in question with the rest of the bible.

There are so many passages about loving others, even loving one's enemies, that we cannot take the words here to indicate hatred of one's family. What is meant is giving priority or preference to the call of Christ even over family love if this becomes an obstacle to following Christian principles.

Commentators write of 'hate' as being an idiomatic term meaning 'to love less.' Nothing must stand in the way of thorough commitment to Christ.

This whole passage is about the cost of discipleship, which is a serious commitment. Not even the sacredness of family loyalty should outweigh our following of Christ. That is the total crossing of the 'I' out. Luke has referred to this division in families on an earlier occasion, which this year we missed as it was replaced by the Assumption.

The point being made then and now is that following Christ can be costly and demanding. We must be ready to let go of any possession, a family tie, a personal relationship, an ambition, occupation or pursuit if these run counter to the way of Christ.

This tough, demanding side of our faith runs directly counter to the permissive culture of the 21st century which cries out for the gratification of every desire or feeling. Pop psychology has sold the religion of self-fulfilment. There is suspicion that voluntary self-denial is a sign of a pathological condition. There is little understanding of making an option for the life of the spirit over the life of the flesh.

Authority of any sort is rejected as some outside power attempting to invade my personal space. Hence rules of behaviour are easily disregarded. Vox pop says 'I should be allowed to do whatever I want to do, and no one should stop me.'

The opening words of the gospel speak of great crowds who were flocking to Jesus. They came out of curiosity, to seek help, to use him for political ends and for many other reasons. The time had come for him to put straight to them that following him would be costly and demanding. Matters of truth or morality are far too serious to be left to the opinion poll. The contemporary mind is very impressed by great crowds.

Whatever seems to happen is immediately photo'd and put on facebook or whatever other instant media is used. The impression is given that great numbers constitute the surest criterion of greatness.

The popularity chart is the judge of music, the best-seller list the arbiter of literature, the constant advertising the seller of fashion of whatever is on offer.

It is worth remembering that there is one instance in the gospels of a decision being taken on a show of hands. It was the day Barabbas was released and Jesus crucified. In that dark and frightening time, did those disciples remember how Jesus had called them to follow him through his suffering and take up their own crosses and chose the hard life of an apostle, all but John were martyred.

Faithful following will at times place heavy demands on personal feelings or occupations. The option for a true disciple will always be for the will of God and Christian principle.

In the quiet of our hearts, can we say that if our lives were at stake would we still put Jesus first?

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