

TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY ORD.TIME C (2016-19)

THE CONDITIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP (LK 14:33)

'None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions' (JB 1966). We know that the Twelve Apostles obeyed this injunction with total dedication to the person of Jesus and his mission. It was a great offence to the Jews of his day. Who did Jesus think he was? Only God had the right to total allegiance. He was outrageous in asking people to abandon the fundamental structure of society, namely the family, even leaving a dead father unburied (9:60). This was contrary to ordinary humanity and a flagrant violation of the Fourth Commandment to love, honour, and obey one's parents.

Slaves

Jesus knew who He was and what it entailed. St. Paul writes in the *Letter to the Philippians* 2:6-11: "Though he was in the form of God Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped [...] He lowered himself and took the form of a *slave*". Paul writing to *Philemon* asks him to take back Onesimus, the slave who had absconded from him, and who had come to Paul. But how could Paul have asked a fellow Christian to keep another Christian as a slave? The condition of slavery was described as "the right to use another person at pleasure, like a piece of property or a domestic animal", *Dio Chrysostom* (XV.24). Slaves were often kidnapped in war. But their treatment varied according to their owners. "Many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as the freeborn; no laws prohibited the public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30" (*Anchor Bible Dictionary VI* pp.66-7). The whole economy of the Greco-Roman world was built on slavery, there was a practice even among Jews of selling their daughters into slavery to meet debts. A 'good' slave owner treated the slave well. However, the system in itself was just the same for the Christian and non-Christian. Shockingly later legislation permitted slaves to be tortured to test their evidence in court, and even the poorer people who were not slaves, could be beaten or tortured according to circumstances (*Ibid.* p.69). Judicial prohibition of the system of slavery was far off. However, the attitude of Christians in that world was intelligible in the light of Christian faith. Since Christ made himself lower than a slave, and Paul called himself and others "slaves of Christ" (Gal 1:10; 1 Cor 7:22), then 'slave' must have had a different ring about it for the early Church. Christians were redefining the attitude to slavery for Christians in the Roman Empire; they could not have changed the ordinary system of normal slavery even if they wanted to. But they could show how it should be lived ever more humanely. Like Christ, believers were committed to removing suffering and committed to accepting it, but never to imposing it. That was the meaning of the Cross- and there were many Christian slaves, comforted in their suffering by it, even as they tried to change their condition and dreamt of freedom.

Believers today

What does all of this imply for us believers? Our faith comes freely from above and our commitment to it is free. We cannot be brainwashed, not by the cleverest advertising, nor the most persuasive social psychology. Love that does not involve self-sacrifice is not love. When we really love someone, we can never do enough for them. And when they are dead no amount of congratulation will persuade us that there was nothing more we could have done. When we have done all these things, we are still unworthy servants, or 'slaves' in Luke's words (Lk 17:10) -we have only done what we ought to do. Good Christian communities sustain us in these commitments, such as families and parishes and schools.

Conclusion

In our own time we are daily conscious of massive immigration and the slaveries that come with it through the hands of unscrupulous people. Christians are in the forefront in trying to help them all. Nobody pretends that there is an easy solution. But in the early nineteenth century abolishing the slave trade was a major commitment of the Evangelical Anglican William Wilberforce who, with many others, less well known, achieved their goal- the parliamentary abolition of slavery in the British Empire (1807) and the further freedom of all slaves in 1833 was also realized in the face of great opposition. It is all about love and respect, isn't it? Politicians and their supporters too often address this problem in purely economic and political terms. Christians see it as the first Christians saw it: having the mind and heart of Christ Jesus. Jesus had called twelve men asking for their total devotion to himself, to preach freedom and justice in a world of love. They would set the downtrodden free and accept their own suffering. St. Paul later said that Christ had set him free, from the Law and from sin and death, thus Paul's discipleship. It meant living by love and not abandoning rights. Paul claimed and demanded the privileges of a Roman citizen; he knew his rights. Today is World Education Day. To have an education is regarded as a human right. We see how appalling it is when such a right is denied or abused. This is especially evidenced in men forbidding women to be educated. One of the most laudable aspects of development in our history is the effort to make education universally available. To encourage and support this at the beginning of the new academic year is why we have an Education Day. Jesus was a teacher and a healer caring for the whole development of every human being. To be his disciple is to identify with this. Amen.

A happy Sunday to you all.

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