

23rd Sunday in Ordinary time C/2007

What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? How can we be a disciple of Christ and what are the conditions set for it? To answer these questions, let us examine today's readings and look at the spiritual insights they propose.

In the Gospel, Jesus sets three major demands that whoever is willing to become his disciple should fulfill. First of all, there is the detachment from familial affection and self love. For Jesus, being his disciple requires being animated by a higher love that is superior to all the familial ties and affections.

When Jesus says that whoever comes to him without hating his family cannot be his disciple, he does not teach us hatred of the members of our families. Rather, he wants us to prefer him to all possible kinship ties of ours and even to our own life. In so doing, he encourages us to break even the dearest bonds we have, if they are an obstacle to the love of God.

Why is it so? It is so because God is the source of everything we have and are in this world; he is the source of our family. If so, how cannot we love God, who is the source of our life, above everything. So exorbitant it might be, when we resituate this demand in the spirit of the Gospel, we realize that it cannot be fulfilled at the detriment of the law of love of God and of our neighbors.

The second demand is the capacity of bearing the cross in the footsteps of Jesus. The cross is the sign of the gift of one's life. In order to be a disciple of Christ, we should be ready to offer ourselves totally for the love of God and our fellow humans, as Jesus did. In this perspective, to bear the cross means to accept courageously the trials of the present life, even if it brings us to lose our own life. It means also to renounce our own life and possibly to lose it like Jesus for the sake of God's kingdom. The cross has nothing to do with masochism; it is a symbol of the difficulties of life we accept for the sake of those we love.

The third demand is about the detachment from material possessions. The main reason why such a renunciation is needed is that at times material attachments prevent us from giving to God the first place in our life. Some people are so obsessed that nothing counts outside their possessions. Moreover, material possessions have the danger of locking our heart into our goods to the point of forgetting that we have received all from God, and for that we have to share with the poor. In all cases anyway, the truth is that if we choose to follow Christ, we have to change our attitudes toward the goods of this world, because they do not have in themselves an absolute value.

All that helps us understand why Jesus insists on the prudence and the wisdom we should have in making the right decisions at the right time so that we may be successful in our relationship with the Lord. In fact, the daily experience of life, the events happening in our life, as well as our responsibilities in society, put us before difficult choices to make where we have to prove concretely that we opt for Christ and his word.

Think, for instance, about the solidarity with the poor and the needy, the defense of human life in all its integrity, the fidelity in our commitments before God and

our fellows, the refusal of violence and revenge, etc. All that puts before us concrete problems we have to tackle not only as good citizens, but also as good Christians. That is why Jesus speaks about sitting down and calculating the cost of discipleship, if we can really live and act according to the demands of his kingdom.

It is true, however, that these demands of Jesus are not easy. How can one prefer the others to his own family? Why shall someone renounce his own interest where he would take advantage of the situation? Why shall someone impose on himself sacrifice and accept renunciation where he would have been comfortable?

As it can appear, if we remain within human logic and use human arguments, the demands of Jesus would be impossible to fulfill. It is only when we let ourselves be guided by God's wisdom and Spirit that we can move on and act accordingly. Left with ourselves, we can but make mistakes and mislead. Alone, we cannot find what God's will is, because our arguments are fuzzy and uncertain when it is about understanding the ways of God. If it is already difficult to understand all the things happening in the world, how much more would it be to penetrate the thoughts of God.

It is God's wisdom, then, that helps us know the will of God and walk in the right paths in life. If God does not give us his wisdom, it will be very difficult for us to act wisely and with discernment in things we do. Wisdom is a gift that comes from God; it requires a total stripping of ourselves in order to abide in God. It brings us to make good decisions in preferring the good of our fellows instead of looking always for our own interests.

That is what St Paul recommends to Philemon about Onesimus, who was a slave, but has become in Jesus, through baptism, a brother. Whereas the fate of a slave in the ancient world was precarious and depending on the good will of his master, St Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back well, to treat him just as if he were his child, his own heart and a dear brother to him. After all, what is the loss of some money compared to the joy of welcoming a brother? By recommending Philemon to do so, St Paul teaches him not only forgiveness, but also detachment from material goods.

Let me finish with this African saying: If you want to hunt lions, first take your spear and thrust it into the ground. If you cannot make it enter deep into the soil, give up the idea of hunting. The teaching is this: Do not deceive yourself about being a disciple of Christ. It is not just a matter of listening to the Gospel or being enthusiastic about it; it is demanding. Think about it and make good decisions that can bring you close to Jesus. May God bless you all!



Homily Date: September 9, 2007
© 2007 – Father Felicien Ilunga Mbala
Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20070909homily.pdf

Wisdom 9, 13-18; Philemon 9-10. 12-17; Luke 14, 25-33