

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

(Wisdom 9:13-18; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33)

Excerpts of Pope Francis – Homily - 04 September 2022

by Father Charles Fillion

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Brothers and sisters, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, and today's Gospel tells us that "large crowds were travelling with him" (*Lk* 24:25). To travel with Jesus means to follow him, to become his disciples. Yet, the Lord's message to those people was not exactly appealing; in fact, it was quite demanding: whoever does not love him more than his or her own family, whoever does not carry the cross, whoever remains attached to earthly goods, cannot be his disciple (cf. vv. 26-27.33).

Now why does Jesus say these things to the crowds? What do these warnings mean? First, we see a great crowd of people following Jesus. We can imagine that many were attracted by his words, astonished at the things he did, and saw him as a source of hope for the future. What would any teacher of that time or, for that matter, what would any intelligent leader do, seeing that his or her words and charisma attract crowds and increase his or her popularity?

The same thing happens today, at times of personal or societal crisis, when we are especially prey to feelings of anger or we fear things that threaten our future. We become more susceptible and therefore, on the tide of emotion, we look to those who can shrewdly take advantage of the situation, profiting from society's fears and promising to be the "saviour" who can solve all its problems, whereas in reality they are looking for wider approval and for greater power, based on the impression they make, their ability to have things in hand.

The Gospel tells us that this is not Jesus' way. God's style is different. It is important to understand God's style, how he acts. Yes, God acts according to a style, and God's style is different from that of certain people, since he does not exploit our needs or use our vulnerability for his own boasting. He does not want to seduce us with deceptive promises or to distribute cheap favours. He is not interested in huge crowds. He is not obsessed with numbers; he does not seek approval; he does not idolize personal success.

On the contrary, he seems to be worried when people follow him with giddy excitement and enthusiasm. As a result, instead of yielding to the allure of popularity – for popularity is alluring – he asks each person to discern carefully their reason for following him and the consequences that it will entail. For many in those crowds might have been following Jesus because they hoped he would be a leader who could set them free from their enemies, someone who, once in power, could share that power with them, or someone who by performing miracles could make hunger and disease disappear.

We can follow the Lord for any number of reasons. Some of these, it must be acknowledged, are worldly. A perfect religious exterior can serve to hide the mere satisfaction of one's own needs, the quest of personal prestige, the desire for a certain social status or to keep things under control, the thirst for power and privilege, the desire for recognition and so on.

This happens even nowadays among Christians. Yet that is not the style of Jesus. That cannot be the style of his disciples and of his Church. If anyone follows Jesus with this kind of self-interest, he or she has taken the wrong path. The Lord demands a different attitude. To follow him does not mean to become part of a court or a triumphal procession, or even to receive a lifetime insurance policy. On the contrary, it means "carrying one's cross" (*Lk 14:27*): shouldering, like Jesus, one's own burdens and those of others, making one's life a gift, not a possession, spending it in imitation of his own generous and merciful love for us.

These are decisions that engage the totality of our lives. Jesus desires that his disciples prefer nothing to this love, even their deepest affections and greatest treasures. To do this, we need to look to him more than to ourselves, to learn how to love, and to learn this from the Crucified One. In him, we see the love that bestows itself to the very end, without measure and without limits. The measure of love is to love without measure. It never sinks beneath the horizon of our lives; it shines upon us and illumines even our darkest nights.

When we look upon the Crucified Lord, we are called to the heights of that love, to be purified of our distorted ideas of God and of our self-absorption, and to love God and others, in Church and society, including those who do not see things as we do, to love even our enemies. To love even at the cost of sacrifice, silence, misunderstanding, solitude, and persecution. A love that perseveres to the end, thorns and all: no leaving things half done, no cutting corners, no fleeing difficulties. If we fail to aim high, if we refuse to take risks, if we content ourselves with a watered-down faith, we are, as Jesus says, like those who want to build a tower but do not estimate the cost; they "lay the foundations", but then are "not able to finish the work" (v. 29).

If the fear of losing ourselves makes us stop giving ourselves, we leave things undone: our relationships and work, our responsibilities and commitments, our dreams and even our faith. And then we end up living life halfway, – without ever taking the decisive step – without ever taking risks for the good, and without ever truly committing ourselves to helping others. Jesus asks us precisely this: live the Gospel and you will live your life, not halfway but to the full. Live the Gospel, live life, with no compromises.