

JESUS' GREAT EXPECTATIONS: 13TH SUNDAY A

Some time ago I was talking with a man who was tiling a bathroom in the house where I was living at the time. He does a lot of work for Christians and a lot of work for Muslims. He claims that Christians and Muslims have at least this much in common: 'Some are fully dedicated,' he said, 'others are half-dedicated, and still others are only a bit dedicated.' That tiler's words remind me strongly of the words of Jesus in our gospel today.

Jesus is talking with his first disciples about both the demands and the rewards of following him. In the area of demands, he raises the question of just how much attachment and dedication to his own person he expects his followers to show. Later he outlines the benefits of Christian commitment. Just for now let's stay with the demands and requirements Jesus put to us.

The way he puts things might at first seem both exaggerated and unreasonable. But they emphasize in a particularly powerful way one pivotal point. It is this. The greatest love of our life has to be God, and the things God wants of us. Of course, there are other loves and loyalties in our lives besides God, legitimate loves and loyalties - our families, e.g., our friends, our work, our sport, our time-out and leisure-time. But in the words which Jesus is using to make his point, he insists that God alone, God's will alone, and God's plans alone must have first place in our lives. Everything and everyone else must be secondary and subordinate.

This might even sometimes mean in a particular situation having to choose Jesus over our nearest and dearest ones and the love that we owe them. This was the choice made, e.g. by the Christian martyr, St Perpetua, a young twenty-two year old married woman in North Africa in c. 200. The Roman administrator asked her to sacrifice incense to the emperor as her god. Her father asked her to give in, taking pity on his white hair. She refused point-blank, saying, 'I am a Christian'. With that came the order to throw her there and then to the wild beasts in the arena. Clearly, in this time of crisis, Perpetua did not prefer father, mother, or anyone else to Jesus. As Jesus has done, so does his faithful follower! Following Jesus in faith, trust, and love in both life and death!

Where do those demands of Jesus on getting our priorities right leave you and me? Surely they keep challenging us to renew our commitment to God and to the other people in our lives, and to do so during this Eucharist. As his disciples we must be open to all people and how we can love and serve them. We must stay committed to the tasks of making and keeping peace, to dealing justly and kindly with everyone, and to respecting and preserving the goodness and integrity of this Planet-Earth where God has placed us, and to take really seriously the implications of climate-change that even threaten the survival of our human race.

But we know from experience, perhaps from bitter experience, just how easy it is to make promises and to undertake commitments, but how difficult it is to keep living them. Without any turning back from, or any taking back from, what we have promised! I remember the words of the writer Michael Quoist about this: 'Only God is faithful,' he says, 'our fidelity lies in the struggle to be faithful amid all our infidelities.'

This demanding teaching of Jesus today also encourages us, not to rely on our own power and strength to live our commitments consistently and faithfully, but to put all our trust in the

power and goodness and fidelity of God. We might take our cue from St Paul, who has stated: 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13).

So, for this great grace to keep imitating Jesus in his perseverance and fidelity in carrying the cross, let us keep praying to the Lord over and over again! Praying not just for ourselves but for all others in our lives!

bgleesoncp@gmail.com