

## PUTTING GOD FIRST: 13<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY C

I was once 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 this much in common: *'Some are fully dedicated,'* he said, *'some are half-dedicated, some a bit dedicated, and others not the least bit dedicated.'* His words remind me of the message of Jesus in the gospel today.

Luke, our story-teller, speaks of Jesus beginning his final journey, his journey to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die, and his journey beyond Jerusalem, when he is destined *'to be taken up to heaven'*. Luke tells us that *'Jesus resolutely took the road for Jerusalem...'*, or, as another translation puts it, *'[Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem'*. Luke is emphasizing the single-minded determination of Jesus, his total dedication to God's plan for Jesus to keep loving no matter what. Even though reaching Jerusalem will bring him rejection, betrayal and death, Jesus keeps his focus on full fidelity to his mission.

As Jesus walks along the road with his first disciples, the question comes up about how much dedication Jesus expects of his followers. Is there to be one standard, the gold standard, for Jesus personally, and a bronze standard, an easier standard, for people like you and me? Jesus answers that there is one standard, one standard only, both for him and for us. That standard is total dedication to God, and total dedication to the people to whom God sends us.

What he expects of us comes through his three replies to three would-be followers. One person says to him in a burst of enthusiasm: *'I will follow you wherever you go.'* Jesus answers with the plain facts: *'Foxes have their dens, and birds have their nests. But my friends and I have no home.'* In other words, you cannot follow me and at the same time live a completely comfortable and hassle-free life.

Jesus says to another person: *'Come and join my company of friends.'* The man hesitates: *'I have to go back for my father's funeral. Let me do that first.'* This was required by Jewish law and was surely a reasonable request. But Jesus insists: *'There's something more important than a funeral - even your father's funeral. That's to keep moving on and keep telling the good news of God's love and God's ways.'*

A third person says: *'I'll come and join your company of friends, sir, but let me first say good-bye to my family.'* That too is a reasonable request. But you cannot plough a straight line in the ground unless you keep your focus on what you are doing. So Jesus says to him: *'Nobody who starts ploughing and then keeps looking back at the field behind is living in God's way.'*

The seeming exaggeration and unreasonableness of Jesus in these situations emphasizes one point. It's simply this. The greatest love of our life has to be God and the things God wants of us. Ask any religious sister, brother or priest just how many times they have been asked to live somewhere else to do a new and challenging ministry there, and you may be surprised to hear just how many times it has happened. The amazing thing is just how happy, peaceful and contented we have been when we burnt our bridges behind us and did what we were asked

to do, instead of digging in and doing our own thing.

Of course, there are other loves in our lives besides God, legitimate loves - our homes, e.g., our families, our friends, our work, our hobbies, our sport and our leisure. But in the words that 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.

Where does this teaching of Jesus leave you and me? It challenges us to renew our commitment to God and to the people God has given us as our responsibility, and to do so during this Eucharist. We know from experience, perhaps from bitter experience, just how easy it is to make promises and to undertake commitments without any turning back from or any taking back 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.*'

The teaching and example of Jesus also encourages us not to rely on our own power and strength to live up to our commitments, but to put all our trust in the power and goodness and fidelity of God. While it's true that Jesus the man '*set his face to go to Jerusalem*', he did so only because he was relying on the power and support of God, given him in his prayer to God.

All of us here have big responsibilities to God and others, whether we are married or single persons, whether we have children or not, whether we are priests or religious. What sort of a line have we been ploughing? Has it been straight, or has it been wavy or even going round and round in a circle?

Being baptised followers of Jesus, we are committed people, and so we cannot walk away or run away from our responsibilities and simply become another '*drop out*' or '*drop kick*'. For, as the saying goes, '*when the going gets tough, the tough get going*'. So let me recommend that in our Holy Communion today, our close sharing with Jesus about all that concerns him and all that concerns us, we remember that it was through communion with God that Jesus '*set his face to go to Jerusalem*'. Words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta affirm our calling. '*God doesn't ask us to be successful,*' she says, '*only to be faithful.*'

May I also recommend that through our mutual love and support, we encourage one another to be more faithful to our different responsibilities and commitments than we are already? Isn't that what St Paul is saying in his words to us in our Second Reading: '*Serve one another in works of love*'?

[bgleesoncp@gmail.com](mailto:bgleesoncp@gmail.com)