

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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COMMITMENT TO JESUS: 13TH SUNDAY OF YEAR (A)

A while back 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 this much in common: 'Some are fully dedicated,' he said, 'others are half-dedicated, and still others are only a bit dedicated.' I am reminded of the tiler's words by the words of Jesus in the gospel today.

As Jesus talks with his first disciples, he raises the question of just how much attachment and dedication to his own person he expects his followers to have. His seeming exaggeration and even unreasonableness in this matter emphasizes one point. This is, that the greatest love of our life has to be the God-man Jesus himself, and the things he wants and requires of us. Of course, there are other loves in our lives - e.g., our families, our friends, our work, our sport and our leisure. But in the words which Jesus is using to make his point, he insists that his person, his will and his plans for us, must have first place in our lives. Everything and everyone else must be secondary and subordinate.

Where does this teaching of Jesus leave us? It surely challenges us to renew our commitment to him and to the people who matter to us, and to do this not only when we are able to take part in the Eucharist, but daily.

Jesus goes on to emphasise that commitment to him involves hospitality to others: 'Whoever welcomes you,' he says, 'welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'

An anonymous writer has composed a biting piece about the opposite of hospitality and welcome to others which he has labelled "*the circle around my life*":

"Much of our lives is spent in keeping people out. We have private houses, private clubs, and so on. Of course, there are times when we need to be alone. Yet there is a sense in which our size as human beings can be measured by the circles we draw to take other people in: the smaller the circle, the smaller the person. A strong person isn't afraid of people who are different. A wise person welcomes them. By shutting other people out, we deny ourselves the riches of other people's experience. We starve our minds, and harden our hearts. In the beginning God gave the earth its shape. He made it round. He included everybody. So should we."

Right now, however, while Covid19 rages, many of us are living lives in lockdown, and are severely restricted in the number of people we can welcome into our circle. But this too will pass, and the challenges will return of giving welcome and hospitality to Jesus in others. But it will be a return to a world of personal and family security that was changing rapidly even before the pandemic struck. Back in 1956 and for a long time afterwards, whenever my parents left the house to go to work in the city, they left their back door unlocked. No thief or vandal ever broke in. Nowadays, however, we feel the need to fortify our houses with locks, bolts, chains, peep holes, alarm systems, and watch-dogs. In our kind of world there are more strangers, aliens, and displaced people than ever before. So, in our current pandemic of isolation and loneliness, there is a more urgent need than ever for friendliness, welcome and hospitality, hospitality that has been described so well as “making space for a stranger to enter, and become a friend”. The teaching of Jesus, then, is more relevant than ever.

When all is said and done, hospitality is more about open hearts than open doors. The teaching of St Paul of the Cross on being a loving person, then, remains up-to-date: “Love is ingenious,” he says. Of course, there is a risk in having an open heart. One can get hurt. But to open one’s heart is to begin to live life to the full. On the other hand, to close one’s heart to Jesus in others is to begin to die, psychologically and spiritually.

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 without any turning back from, or any taking back from, what we have promised. I remember words about this from the writer Michael Quoist: He says: “Only God is faithful; our fidelity lies in the struggle to be faithful amid all our infidelities.”

The teaching of Jesus on who and how to love 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 mercy, the goodness and fidelity of Jesus, God’s greatest messenger and representative, and our personal and community Saviour.

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