

Sunday, June 28, 2020

(Matthew 10:37-42)

The Gospel according to Matthew consists primarily of **Five Discourses** given by Jesus: The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the Mission Discourse (Mt 10), the Parable Discourse (Mt 13), the Discourse on Life in the Christian community (Mt 18) and, finally, the Discourse on Eschatology, that is, the End times (Mt 23-25). Last Sunday and this Sunday, we have the Gospel readings from Jesus' Mission Discourse in chapter 10, where Jesus speaks on various aspects of our Christian life and mission. In the readings of these two Sundays, Matthew presents the **two most fundamental** requirements necessary for any follower of Jesus (that is, any Christian worth the name). They are **freedom** (from fear and anxiety) and **detachment**.

Last Sunday, Jesus exhorted us "not to be afraid of anyone" but to have **Faith**. Faith or trust is not possible without freedom from fear. On several earlier occasions, I have made it amply clear that Faith/Trust is not the same as beliefs. Beliefs are a cephalic acceptance of certain religious truths/facts, and are a necessary and important starting point or means towards faith. Unlike beliefs which are cephalic, faith is a product of the heart. Faith is Trust, and trust is possible when we are free from fear and anxiety. Faith makes us insouciant and nonchalant. Therefore, to trust in God is to be free from every other concern. People of faith are free from all sorts of bigotry and obsessions with nationalism, racism, color, caste, religion, denomination, gender discriminations, xenophobia, and free even from pedantry and punctiliousness in matters of religious rituals and rubrics. People of faith have only one single concern: Love of God, which is expressed by both a total surrender to God **AND** love of neighbour. This was what we meditated last Sunday.

For our meditation today, we will focus only on the first three verses of today's reading which speak about detachment from family, following Jesus and, finally, losing one's life for Jesus' sake (verses 37-39). So, it is all about **detachment**, which is a very fundamental and essential aspect of Christian life and discipleship. Essentially, these two requirements ("freedom" [from fear & anxiety] and "detachment") are two sides of the same coin. Actually, freedom **is** detachment. When I am not attached to anyone or anything, I am already free; so detachment **is** freedom and freedom **is** detachment.

Today's text reads that those who love their family more than Jesus are not worthy of him (verse 37). In the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel (14:26), Luke says that we need to **hate** our parents, brothers and sisters in order to become his followers. Well, we should not take this word "hate" literally. Jesus, who was totally **obedient** to his parents (Luke 2:51) and who gave us the commandment of loving one another as the only commandment in John's Gospel (John 13:34-35; 15:12), would never ask us to ignore or hate our family. Besides, the commandment to love and honour our parents is one of the ten fundamental commandments in the Bible (Exodus 20:12; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 5:16). Again, remember the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman, who left behind her own country in order to serve her mother-in-law Naomi in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:15-18). Jesus would go even further and berate the scribes and Pharisees who would offer to God in sacrifice what in fact was reserved for the upkeep of their parents, thus

reinforcing the fact that loving concern for the parents is a **duty enjoined on us** by God (Read carefully Matthew 15:1-6; Mark 7:9-13).

If that be the case, what do the Gospel writers mean by asking us to hate our family or to lose one's life in order to follow Jesus? It simply means that discipleship under Jesus entails that we need to avoid any excessive or inordinate attachment or slavery to any particular person or thing that could possibly make us blind and callous to the larger Christian vision of universal love and concern. Love for Jesus/God does not refer to an emotion. Rather, love of God is loyalty and absolute allegiance to Him which requires some sort of self-denial and a little 'giving up' on my part. Therefore, it is **NOT** disregarding or hating one's family that is meant by today's Gospel, but the willingness to extricate ourselves from the tangled web of inordinate and excessive attachment to our family and friends so that we may belong to a larger universal family.

Secondly, in the Gospels, Jesus always asked us to "follow" him. For Jesus, discipleship is **following** him on his journey to Calvary where the full revelation of the Father will take place on the cross. To follow someone, I need to leave someone or something behind. Without a leaving, without a departure, there is no journey, there is no following. Egypt must be abandoned in order to arrive in and occupy the Promised Land. Babylon must be left behind in order to reclaim the once lost kingdom of Judah and the Temple city of Jerusalem. And, as we know, a child in the womb has to let go its hold on the mother's umbilical cord to be born into this world. In fine, some sort of denial, giving up, and letting go is necessary for a greater and noble cause. This is the meaning of "losing one's life" mentioned in today's Gospel (verse 39).

Often we think that discipleship or giving up family is meant only for priests and religious. Jesus never preached to priests and nuns. Priesthood and Religious life are a later historical development in the Church. Rather, Jesus preached his gospel (good news) to the people of his land, to the crowds, and to everyone who today reads the Gospel and is wanting to experience joy and peace. So, Jesus' call to follow him is meant for every Christian. It is a call to inner freedom. It is one who is free from within and is detached that can be really joyful. Detachment means the freedom from possessing or belonging to someone or something. As long as I possess my family or am possessed by my family, I am not free to belong to the larger universal family of God.

The Franciscan theologian St Bonaventure said that God is one "whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Christian discipleship is this invitation to accept the fatherhood/motherhood of God so that we may be able to ensure that all God's children are able to enjoy the resources of this earth where God alone reins as the King/Queen. The land on which we have built our house and the whole earth belong not to us but to God (Psalm 24:1). So, 'losing one's life' or 'hating' one's family is a metaphor, meaning a continuous process of ego-ectomy (the removal of my selfishness and ego) so that I am free and able to love all God's people. Amen.

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