

Commitment
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Lk 9:51-62)

At the time of Baptism we were consecrated to Christ as his followers. This decision was made by our parents, but as we grow up in the faith, we have to make that commitment our own, especially through the vocation by which we eventually serve God and the Church. For most Catholics, this sacred vocation is matrimony.

The world does not understand the kind of commitment which Christ requires. The world thinks all decisions are in your control, to be made and unmade at will; it does not understand the concept of a sacred covenant, in which a life is given entirely, and sealed by an oath or vow. Because of our sinfulness and selfishness, we struggle to follow Christ completely, both with regard to our Baptismal consecration, and with regard to our subsequent vocation.

Jesus addresses the importance of this commitment in the Gospel today. St. Luke recounts several things Jesus said of those who would follow him.

To one man who would be his follower, Jesus explained that unlike the birds and foxes, he could guarantee no fixed place to lay his head. Following Christ must be unconditional, open-ended with regard to where it will lead or how it will end up. We like for things to be fixed and steady, but in following Christ the only thing that is fixed is the fact that we are with him. Earthly and human circumstances will change, and rarely pan out as we envision. Our commitment must be such that it is unaffected by all such vicissitudes. In the priesthood, for instance, there is no permanent home, but only a succession of different assignments. In marriage too, there is often moving, unexpected pregnancies, and even changes in the relationship itself, such that initial expectations are radically altered by later circumstances. This is why in marriage vows we say, “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health...”

This kind of commitment is illustrated beautifully by Ruth, who left her people and pagan religion to find fulfillment in the promised land with Naomi her Jewish mother-in-law: “*Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried*” (Ru 1:16-17).

The underlying teaching of Jesus is that the commitment must be total, on every level. Many other worldly commitments and promises are partial. We commit a certain amount of time to an enterprise, we divide up our talents in several areas including job, hobbies, and family activities – no one thing requires everything. Most of these commitments can be changed and altered at will, given

or withdrawn at any time. Many acquaintances and friendships are the same way: we do not give ourselves entirely to any one person.

However, with regard to baptismal and vocational commitment it is different. By means of an oath or vow, one commits the *self*, one “lays down his life,” offers it as a sacrifice on the altar. This commitment requires the giving of self completely: body, soul, and spirit. It is for this reason the sacred vocations of priesthood, religious life, and matrimony all begin with a prostration (or kneeling) before the altar. It is also why once married to someone, it is not possible to marry another while one’s actual spouse still lives. The marriage vows conclude with those words, “. . .until death do us part.” Those words mean exactly what they say. As Jesus said elsewhere in the Great Commandment: “*You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself*” (Mt 22:37).

Jesus also said once you set your hand to the plow, you cannot look back. To plow the field, the farmer must cut straight tight rows, directing the blade into the ground while the ox does the heavy work of pulling it ahead of him. He must keep his eyes fixed on the task at hand, and not be distracted. When he becomes weary, or encounters difficulties and obstacles, he must not give up, but see it through to the end. He has his field to work, and it does no good to look to his neighbor’s field with jealousy. There is no going back once you start.

This is the quality needed for commitment to the Lord: total fidelity and *single-minded* focus. Unlike the world which always encourages us to “keep your options open,” assuming a vocation means closing off all other options but one. Marriage, for instance, requires a fidelity that is exclusive, and this must be jealously guarded. Jesus says even to look at another person lustfully is to commit adultery (Mt 6:28). This fidelity is first of all to one’s baptismal consecration: fidelity to one’s spouse and vocation is fundamentally a fidelity to God. This kind of commitment is illustrated by Lot’s wife, who had a difficult time leaving her immoral society and setting her sight entirely on God. By looking back to Sodom with regret, she indicated her unworthiness, and was turned into a pillar of salt (Gn 19:26).

A final point to highlight from the Gospel is the way many followers make excuses in order to avoid following the Lord. Commitment to the Lord requires prompt and ready obedience to the will of God, without exception. This is graphically illustrated by the man who asks to bury his father first. Jesus replies in his usual shocking way: “let the dead bury their dead.”

Jesus himself, in his person, is the “resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:17). It therefore makes no sense, when we understand the “big picture” of a vocation, to

leave the one who is Life itself, in order to go and be with those who can only experience mortality and death, and who typically live in a spiritual death anyway of immorality and sin. Jesus is saying that there is nothing in the world, including natural human relationships, that can ever justify staying away from him, or even delaying for an instant.

To highlight this supreme truth, this example makes use of what is probably the highest human responsibility: one's duties toward one's family. Jesus is not saying we must not care for our elderly and infirm parents, but he is making the point that our obligation to him is an even higher one. One of the greatest dangers to our vocational commitment is the innumerable and important responsibilities which constantly delay or interfere with our highest and most fundamental responsibilities. Priests are constantly tempted to take care of this or that task before fulfilling their most fundamental daily obligation of prayer and Liturgy of the Hours. "*One thing is necessary,*" Jesus told Martha (Lk 10:42). Likewise, spouses are constantly tempted to be consumed by work or the kids, before fulfilling their most fundamental daily obligation which is their relationship with each other. True discipleship of the Lord requires and uncompromising and prompt obedience to the will of God, the voice of Christ.

A perfect biblical example of this is the moment Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be his first followers, which took place as they were cleaning, mending, and storing the nets for their fishing boats. They *immediately* dropped what they were doing and began to follow Jesus, leaving their father Zebedee and the others in the boat, completely bewildered (Mk 1:16-20).

At the time of our Baptism a great commitment was made on our behalf: a covenant of total consecration, a vow, an oath, a sacrament. The danger is that we grow up as Catholics never realizing what that commitment requires, and mistaking our discipleship of the Lord for some ordinary worldly commitment. As a result, our vocational decisions also end up being weak and disastrous. Jesus reiterates the kind of commitment necessary to follow him: unconditional, total, exclusive, uncompromising obedience.