



Today 9/8 we celebrate the Birthday/Nativity of the Most Beloved, the Most Loving and the Most Lovable Mother of all - Blessed Mother Mary! May the celebration of the Nativity of our Blessed Mother, help us to deepen our love towards Her and may we, holding Her Hands, walk in the path of God, more faithfully and strongly committed!

Reflection – Deliberation in following Jesus

Jesus speaks in the gospel reading on two parables this morning. Someone intending to build a tower starts on the work and then discovers he cannot finish the work, probably because he underestimated the cost. In contrast, a king who is planning a war against his enemy realizes that he won't be able to achieve the victory he wants and, so, instead of starting a war, he works for peace. One man, the king, thought through what he intended to do before starting down the road, the other, the tower builder, did not think it through. Whenever we plan some big undertaking, whether as individuals or as communities, we need to sit down, preferably with others, and plan it carefully.

In speaking those two parables, Jesus seems to be saying that becoming his follower requires a certain amount of reflection and deliberation on our part. It is a much more serious matter than painting a church or building a tower. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not just taking an action of some kind, even an action of great moment and consequence. It is more a case of taking on a certain mindset which affects all of our actions, everything we do in life. Becoming a Christian is not one action among many. It is a decision about the kind of person we want to be. It is as if Jesus is reminding the crowds who are accompanying him, and reminding us, just what a momentous decision it is to become his disciple and what it involves. He goes so far as to say at the beginning of the gospel reading that it involves 'hating his father, mother...'. These are very strange words to our ears. How could Jesus who spoke so much about love, compassion, and forgiveness now be talking about hating and especially hating those closest to us? In order to understand the text properly, we must understand that Jesus' use of the verb 'to hate' is a Semitism, a way of speaking that was typical of the cultural background of Jesus. At that time the meaning of 'hating' would have been the equivalent of or very similar to 'putting into second place' or as the modern French bible puts it 'to prefer'. That is, if one does not prefer me to his parents etc., he cannot be my disciple. This is the real meaning of the text.

The Freedom to Let Go – Renouncing

Jesus places some extreme demands on us in today's gospel. Does he really expect us to hate our father and mother? Does he expect us to renounce all of our possessions? How can we live without healthy human relationships? How can we survive without a house for shelter, a car for travel, and some money in the bank to deal with unexpected crises? Why is Jesus so insistent that we renounce our relationships and our possessions?

Children are good. But every parent who sends off a son or daughter to college must find the freedom of letting go of the proximity of their relationship so that their child might grow. Popularity is good. But there are times when we have to let go of what our friends think of us to do what is right. Health is good. But when we contract a disease without a cure or begin to experience the disability of growing older, we must find the freedom to let go of our health as we once had it and to choose a new way in which to live. It is hard to let go of good things in our lives, but there are times where it is essential to do so. In those times, if we try to hold on to our children, to our marriage, to our popularity, or our health, it will not bless us but only harm us.

That is why we must find the freedom to let go. Our faith can help us here. Jesus tells us that when we find the freedom to let go of those things of which we must put behind us, God will not forget us. Jesus tells us that if we let go of the good things that we must, we can become his disciples. That is good news, indeed. When we are in the presence of Christ, there is not only water but wine, not only survival but the fullness of life.

Practicing the Cross – Taking our cross and following Jesus

"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." These are the words of Jesus and we are called to obey them. But what is most difficult in Jesus' command is not simply carrying our cross but remaining open to life as we do so. The greatest challenge for a disciple is not picking up the cross but carrying it and still being a joyful and positive person.

We do not have a choice whether we are going to carry our crosses or not. They just come to us. We turn a corner in our life and suddenly we realize, "I'm going to have to deal with sickness, or divorce, or rejection, or unemployment." All of us would rather avoid these troubles, but they come to us and we have no choice but to take them up and carry them. But what we can choose is *how* we carry them. We can choose to let our crosses absorb all of our energy and joy or carry them and at the same time remain open to life.

Betty, a lady in her forty, had the worst arthritis. Her hands were like twisted fists. she always greeted everyone with a broad and sincere smile. One day when she was asked about her positive attitude and "how can you be so happy with your arthritis?" She said with smiled face, "It's the only way I can be happy. "This arthritis causes me pain, but it is not fatal. God willing, I still have many years to live. And there is a lot of good in my life. I have a loving husband. I have great children, good friends, satisfying hobbies, a parish that I care for. So, I decided to practice the discipline of focusing on what is good in my life rather than what is wrong.

Betty may be one of the greatest examples of what it means to take up your cross and follow after Jesus. We can follow her example. We can use the troubles of today to practice for the bigger troubles that are likely to come. There is nothing wrong with taking our present frustrations, disappointments, and burdens and use them to build the discipline of choosing life. There is an advantage in using those disappointments to develop the skill of focusing in on what is good. This is how we can carry our

cross without letting it crush us. This is how we can bear our pain and at the same time embrace the joy of living.

Our Weakness - God's Strength – Becoming a disciple of Jesus

Holiness is not being perfect. Holiness is claiming our weakness in the presence of God's strength. All too frequently you and I place ourselves in the center of the gospel. We imagine that our successes and our failures determine what our relationship with God will be. Therefore, on a day when we are feeling particularly generous or patient or just, we feel good; we feel holy. We feel that because of our successful efforts our relationship with God works.

Today's first reading from the Book of Wisdom explodes such an understanding. The Book of Wisdom says, "Who can discern what God wills? The reasoning of mortals is worthless. Our designs will often fail." The Book of Wisdom is saying that we are not at the center of the gospel, *God is*. It is not our actions, but God's action that makes our relationship and becoming a disciple of Jesus possible. Are we called to do good and avoid evil? Yes, we are. Are we called to work for justice and to love others with patience? Absolutely. But it is not these efforts on our part which establish our relationship with God. God does that by God's free choice to make us sons and daughters. Therefore, we can be disciples not only when we are successful, but even when we fail. We can be holy not only when we feel God's presence, but even in those times when we feel that God has abandoned us.

Recently the private diaries of Mother Teresa of Calcutta were made public. To the surprise of almost everyone who has read them, these diaries make clear that this woman, who many think was the greatest saint of the twentieth century, who many point to as the clearest example of what it means to be a follower of Christ, struggled with her faith on a daily basis. At times, her doubts about faith were so severe that she even questioned the existence of God. She revealed to a priest confidant, "Inside my soul, there is only darkness. I feel myself totally cut off from God's love." But Mother Teresa was a saint. She continued to do her work with the poor even though she doubted so profoundly and so regularly. She was a saint because Mother Teresa knew that it was not her faith or lack of faith that determined her relationship with Christ. She was willing to claim her weakness in the presence of God's strength.

Our journey of faith is not some self-achievement effort. It does not proceed because of our successes in living the Christian life. Even though we are

always called to strive towards the good, when we fail to reach that good, it does not exclude us from God's Kingdom. Is it a blessing if we have a strong marriage and our family is secure in love for one another? Absolutely. But even when we have to face the pain of different kinds and people who we love reject us, even when our family fails, we can still be holy people. Are we being followers of Christ when we work for justice when we love one another when we forgive with all of our heart? Of course, we are. But even at those times when we give in to selfishness, when we act out of prejudice, when we find we are unable to love, God is still with us, God has not forgotten us. Is it a joy when we can pray easily when it's easy to hope about the future? Of course, it is. But even in those times when our prayers are empty, when our hope evaporates, and when we feel that God has abandoned us, even in those times, Christ still walks with us.

Our relationship with God does not depend on how successful we can be. It depends only on God's love, and God has chosen us. God does not make mistakes. If Mother Teresa can be a modern saint even though she struggled regularly with doubt and darkness, then there is more than enough room for our doubt and failures and shortcomings. Holiness is not being perfect. Holiness is claiming our weakness in the presence of God's strength.

Let us pray:

Lord, my life is Yours. Please give me the grace to surrender and prefer you more than my finances, my possessions, my family, my labors and my entire future. All is Yours, dear Lord. Do with me what You will.

Jesus, I trust in You.