

HOMILY FOR THE 13TH SUNDAY OT, CYCLE C (2019)

Many people today are engaging in the centuries-old practice of making a spiritual pilgrimage to a holy place.

Some of the more popular sites are the Holy Land, the ancient ruins of the places St. Paul visited or Medugorje.

There has been revived interest in people wanting to meet the great challenge of walking the 500-mile journey to the traditional burial site of St. James the Apostle in Compostela, Spain.

A spiritual pilgrimage is a unique experience which has the following four characteristics:

First, it has a sacred place as its destination; the pilgrim is going to a certain place, but to a place where he or she can encounter the sacred in a special way.

Secondly, the pilgrim experiences transformation during the journey; if you return from the pilgrimage unchanged, something has been missed.

Thirdly, the pilgrim can expect the transformation to be challenging; the pilgrimage is intended to summon us out of our comfort zones into fresh and new ways of living.

Fourth, a pilgrimage necessarily takes us out of our daily routine; we leave friends, work, daily responsibilities and media behind during the time of a pilgrimage.

A spiritual pilgrimage is a journey, and our Gospel reading today begins by speaking of a journey that Jesus and his disciples are making.

As the disciples make this journey with Jesus, they will be challenged to open themselves to a spiritual transformation.

The mention of a journey in our Gospel reading today is far from being a passing comment.

Jesus is leaving Galilee to go to Jerusalem, where he will achieve salvation for the whole human race.

Jesus will proceed through Samaria and Judea, all the while presenting the challenge for people to embrace the life of God's Kingdom.

When he reaches Jerusalem, his journey will proceed through suffering, death, resurrection,

ascension and finally to his rightful place with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Just as I said earlier that spiritual pilgrimages are transformative, and this transformation is not easy, so the same is true for Jesus' disciples as they accompany him on his journey

If the disciples are to follow Jesus to his ultimate destination, they will have to experience transformation, a transformation that will call them out of their comfort zones so they might be prepared for life in the Kingdom.

Not long before Luke mentions Jesus' embarking upon a journey to Jerusalem, Jesus twice predicts his passion and death and tells the disciples that if they are to continue in his following they must take up their own crosses.

Many of Jesus' disciples will suffer martyrdom, but on the journey, taking up the cross will involve the difficulty of spiritual transformation.

We see this already in the very first incident following Luke's mention of the journey.

Jesus sends disciples ahead into Samaria to prepare people for his coming, even as he had done earlier in Galilee.

You may recall that Samaritans and Jews were not friendly toward one another, and this hostility manifests itself when the Samaritans learn that Jesus is headed for Jerusalem.

The reaction of the disciples, who are probably still feeling a little proud over the success of their mission in Galilee, want to call upon divine forces to destroy the Samaritans who reject Jesus.

But Jesus responds to them in a surprising, and not very subtle way by rebuking the disciples for their suggestion.

Why does he do this? Because the disciples have apparently forgotten what he told them earlier in the Sermon on the Plain: *love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*

And during his passion, Jesus himself will model such forgiveness by asking God's pardon for those who crucify him.

The cross for the disciples here will be to let go of the desire for retaliation and rather to learn to love those who reject them.

As Jesus moves on, we are told that there were some people who expressed a desire to accompany him on his journey.

But Jesus points out to them the challenges of being on this journey with him.

First, they will have to leave behind everything that made them secure.

Secondly, they need to understand that being a disciple of Jesus supersedes all other obligations and commitments.

In the Gospel story this is demonstrated in a very graphic way when Jesus tells a would-be follower that he has to give priority to proclaiming the gospel even over attending to the very important obligation of burying one's dead.

Finally, not even family ties can override the disciple's obligation to do the work of the Kingdom to which he or she is appointed.

Whether we describe these challenges to would-be disciples as examples of "taking up the cross" or being "spiritually transformed" what is apparent is that being a disciple will mean learning to make the hard decision to place our obligation to the Kingdom before any others.

For a Christian the whole of life is a journey with the risen Lord.

At times our continuance on this journey with the Lord will mean that we have to change long-held ways of thinking and being that are contrary to our progress on the journey.

At other times we will find ourselves being asked to do something with which we are not totally comfortable, or to be witnesses to Christianity among people who are unsupportive of it.

We will be asked to attend to the business of the Kingdom even before family or work obligations.

The person who at work refuses to participate in a practice that is unjust and risks negative consequences is the person who embraces the spiritual transformation to which Jesus invites us.

In our daily lives we are disciples on the journey with Jesus, and as we undertake that journey we will be challenged to respond to situations with the mindset of the Kingdom.

This will mean at times that we have to let go of our first inclinations that are not consistent with the values of the Kingdom, or we will have to adapt to situations that are unexpected.

The transformative character of the journey with Jesus is not just about subjecting us to difficulty.

The greater aspect of spiritual transformation is that we become more fully persons who fit into the Kingdom of God that is coming.

And we have to consider the destination of the journey: Jesus suffered, died, rose and ascended to the Father.

If we continue to follow Jesus, our destination will be the same as his.