

**23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C**  
*“Be my disciples ...”*

Some 50 years ago, there was a bishop who went to Ireland to recruit newly ordained men to come to his diocese in the northwest to serve as priests. He told them of the country’s beautiful mountains, the green forests, and crystal, clear lakes and the moderate climate. He spoke of how wonderful their lives would be if they were to come. Another bishop, in a neighboring diocese, also went to Ireland about the same time to recruit newly ordained priests to come to the northwest also, and to serve in his diocese. But instead of appealing to the beauty of the country, he spoke of the great needs of his people. A priest often had to cover hundreds of square miles to provide Mass in the small, outlying towns. He told them that life would be difficult, winters were cold and summers were hot, but that the need for their ministry was great. While the one tried to entice young priests to take the carrot of a good life, the other warned them of the hard work that awaited them. Most of the young priests chose to go with the bishop who challenged them to a life that would not be easy. He spoke to their hearts and challenged them with the cross.

The young priests were idealistic and wanted to make the world a better place. They wanted to proclaim the gospel and to bring people to Christ. They were so caught up in their vision of serving in the name of Jesus that they chose, as they say, *“the road less traveled and it made all the difference.”* After all, they hadn’t become priests for an easy life. They became priests to make the love of God real in the lives of people who were hungry to grow in faith. In fact, there was something attractive to the idea of spending their lives in service to others. That is why they were ordained, wasn’t it?

Actually, they were not much different than young couples getting married with the desire to love their spouse no matter what, even if it would demand heroism. I think of those old love songs in my day that spoke of swimming the deepest oceans and climbing the highest mountains for one's sweetheart. (Eddie Fisher was good at those kinds of songs.) It was their way of saying, *"If loving her means carrying the cross, I'm ready to carry it."*

In today's gospel, Jesus appeals to the idealism of the people who were following him. He could see that they were attracted to him and to his message. And he wants them to be disciples, to serve with him and to help him bring his message of love to the world. He doesn't appeal to their natural desires, but to that deep place in their souls that called them to go for more; to make a real difference in the world. He lays out three conditions:

#1 *"You cannot love anyone more than me. You must be willing to make your relationship with me the top priority in your life. If you can't, there is no way you can do my work, or make my love real to the world. This does not mean you cannot love your family or spouse or kids, but that you must love them in the context of your love for me."* I believe that if we love them in the context of our love for God, we will love them in ways we otherwise couldn't. Jesus continues.

#2 *"You must be willing to follow me, that is, to follow the way of love in your life, and to go where love takes you, even if that means going to the cross. Following me will demand the best that is in you, because it will demand that you love others, all others, regardless. You must work for justice and be people of peace. You cannot return injury for injury, but must turn the other cheek, forgive, and stop the cycle of violence."*

#3 *"You cannot carry any baggage that will compromise the message of the gospel. If you think life is about making money, or if you choose to use power over others rather than to serve others, you have done just that*

*and you have jeopardized your role as my disciple. Can't you see that? If it is not my way, it is some other way, and certainly not the way of the gospel."*

I don't know about you, but I find this gospel very sobering. I know that I am a Christian, because I've been baptized into Christ. I am a part of the Body of Christ, a child of God and your brother in Christ. I know that the Holy Spirit dwells within me, and that Jesus acts through me as a priest. I know all that. But that is all because of what God has done for me when I was baptized, confirmed and ordained. While all of that makes me a Christian, none of it makes me a disciple. That's up to me. I must live my Christian identity by following Jesus and His way of love. That is what this gospel is all about. Instead of being so proud of ourselves as Christians, perhaps we should be humbled that Jesus wants us to be his disciples.

What does our life-style say? Or our commitments? Or the relationships we are in, and the way we are living them out? Or our attitude about passing on the Faith to our children, or even being faithful to it ourselves? Being Christian is not enough. Jesus wants us to be his disciples. He is challenging us to be the best we can be. (Where have we heard that before?)

Don't be afraid of this gospel. Don't pass it off as unrealistic, or too idealistic. Let it speak to that place deep inside of you that will not allow you to be overcome by discouragement, cynicism or fear. Let us not forget that Jesus came that we may have life and have it in abundance, and that he wants his joy to be ours and our joy to be complete. Jesus is showing us there is a better way to live life. And it is the way of self-giving love; the way to a peace that no one can take from us.

We can't be disciples without God's grace. Remember, Jesus promised to walk with us. May the Eucharist we now celebrate continue the transformation of our hearts.