

Today’s words from Jesus in the gospel are “hard.” “Hate” in regard to family relationships, “carrying the cross” and “renouncing all one’s possessions”. Choosing and attempting to put into action any one of these is a tall order. Embracing all three as conditions to be “my disciple” seems too much to ask. Just what is Jesus demanding?

St. Luke tells us that great crowds were following Jesus, no doubt because they had heard him personally, perhaps witnessed a miracle done by him, or had heard of his reputation or about him from others. Jesus wants the crowd then, and us today, to know exactly what being his follower demands. Jesus then, and Jesus now, is not interested in a fan club, a “friend page” on Facebook or Twitter; no, Jesus is looking for disciples. And it is to the nature of discipleship that Jesus addresses his words.

Jesus is very up front with us. He bluntly challenges the crowd to take up the demands of discipleship with eyes wide open. He lays out three demands. First we must hate father and mother. Obviously, Jesus does not mean this literally (over and over again Jesus tells us that we must love everybody, even our enemies). This exaggerated demand is a way for Jesus to stress that even our family relationships (where we first receive life and preserve it) and our very own lives (our many “comfort zones”) must not take precedence over following him. Many, at times, are the temptations from our natural family, or the “family” relationships of business, sports, or politics where we are tempted to “go along to get along” even at the cost of personal integrity, truth or divine revelation. Second, we must carry our cross. This means embracing the daily discipline of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Many, at times, are the temptations to simply “take care of me” to the exclusion of others, even those closest to us. Third, we must “renounce all ...possessions.” This command, like that of “hating” one’s family must be taken in context. “Possessions” here not only refers to an undue attachment to material riches, but also such things as popularity, authority, or position that can be, and are, used as a means by which we identify ourselves or set us apart from others.

In three different ways Jesus tries to help us calculate the cost of following him. Are we “fans” or “disciples”? Here we come face-to-face with the great paradox, the central mystery of our Christian faith—we have to die if we wish to follow Jesus. The cost of discipleship seems disproportionately high compared with anything we could want or value as humans, the point made by the author of *Wisdom* today. Why is the cost of discipleship so high? Because Jesus set the standard. He gave everything “emptied himself” out of love and obedience to God the Father in total love for us, to quote St. Paul. We, too, are called to the same kind of radical self-sacrificial love. This is the love which becomes present again and again in each Mass, the love and life we commit ourselves to each time we come forward to receive Holy Communion. Following Jesus is a call to go beyond human expectations. It leads to death, to be sure, but a death that grants us a share in God’s very divine life, an outcome worth any price.

The monk had reached the outskirts of the village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, “The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!”

“What stone?” asked the monk.

“Last night God appeared to me in a dream,” said the villager, “and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I should find a monk who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever.”

The monk rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. “He probably meant this one,” he said as he handed the stone over to the villager. “I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it.”

The man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond; probably the largest diamond in the whole world, for it was as large as a person’s head.

He took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed and turned about in bed, unable to sleep. Next day at the crack of dawn he woke the monk and said, “Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.”