

"The Cost of Discipleship"

Homily of June 27, 2004

by Father Iomar Daniels

Some friends who went deer hunting separated into pairs for the day. And that night one hunter returned alone, staggering under an eight-point buck. "Where's Harry?" asked another hunter. "Oh, he fainted a couple of miles up the trail," Harry's friend answered. "And you left him lying there all alone and carried the deer back?""A tough call," said the hunter. "But I figure no one is going to steal Harry."

And then there is the story of Paddy, the Irishman living on a small island off the Irish coast, and therefor, he found it very difficult to get to the sacrament of reconciliation very often. And he happened to be on the mainland one time and went to the sacrament. And when he was finished, the priest urged him to go to confession more often. But Paddy refused and pleaded he couldn't because he was cut off on the island, off the mainland. But the priest persisted, recommending he take the small plane that flies in and out of the island on a regular basis. So he would have no more excuses. But Paddy refused, saying it was too expensive for venial sins and too dangerous for mortal ones.

Now, these two stories go some small way to illustrate the problem we have in making a commitment to another person, and of making excuses. We can find it difficult, you see, to commit ourselves to following Jesus, and we find many excuses for not doing so. Today's readings invite us to measure our priorities and to examine the excuses we make not to answer God's call to be His disciple. Now, it must be acknowledged that, in today's Gospel in particular, it is like an advertisement that doesn't want to sell what is on offer. It reads something like this: "Come join our faith and suffer." You see, Jesus was in a determined frame of mind to go to Jerusalem. And we all know what that meant. It wasn't like going up to Sacramento for the day. He was determined to go to His passion and His death. (And after seeing the film, "The Passion of the Christ," it was nothing to be so determined about.) Jesus decided to go the direct route, through Samaria. And Samaritans and Jews were not friends, to put it mildly. Samaritans constantly hindered and injured bands of Jewish pilgrims who attempted to pass through their territory. What Jesus was hoping to do was to reach out a hand of friendship to them. But they refused. So, rejection and hostility is often the price of discipleship.

Then we find out that the cost of discipleship could be even higher. Three would-be followers find out just how demanding discipleship is in today's gospel. It can be a lonely journey. The Son of Man has nowhere to rest His head. We cannot let sentiment, and emotion sometimes, get in the way of the work that has to be done. And we have to prioritize. We cannot be making excuses, even if it means that "the dead have to bury the dead." Even familial ties have to be

sacrificed for the sake of the kingdom. A plowman never plowed straight furrows by looking backwards. Discipleship, you see, calls for complete commitment, no looking back.

Now a story is told of a religious sister who joined a very strict religious order. She was very young and innocent, but very earnest. After three weeks in the novitiate, her mother died, unexpectedly. And, because she was on retreat, her superiors didn't give her the message. They couldn't give her the message. They didn't want to upset her and break her concentration. A retreat is a retreat. Her father was an invalid for thirteen years, and his wife's death took a great toll on him. Within a few days, he was dead. Another telegram arrived at the convent and her superiors then were very distressed at this stage, and gave the young religious sister the news of the deaths of her father and her mother. But the rules said that she couldn't leave the convent for the funerals. You see the sisters were taking today's gospel literally. The sisters were saying that the dead bury the dead. The story has its roots in today's gospel.

And, of course, you see the message from today's gospel is that following Jesus is tough. The way to Jerusalem is tough. It is the road to crucifixion. Anyone wanting to follow Jesus must be ready for that. There is no point in just traipsing after Jesus. The journey is no joke. The point is that, if you want to be a follower of Jesus, you have to be able to make a total commitment. No excuses! In fact, there is much common sense in what Jesus is saying. For example, if you embark on a medical or legal career you have to study hard, give up many nights on the town, and follow your professor's instructions. If you want, for example, to represent your country in this year's Olympics, you would have to deny yourself twenty scoops of delicious chocolate ice cream, follow a very tough regime and do what your coach tells you. And it is the same, you see, with following Jesus, according to today's gospel. There are no free rides. No crosses, no growth. No pain, no gain. And, while we don't have to take Him literally, as the sisters in the convent did, in everything He said, we must not take Him lightly, or take His challenge lightly.

We too must be determined to journey to Jerusalem, be determined to take up our cross. In fact, someone has said that it is not one cross that we have to take up, but three. The first is the cross of inconvenience. There is no point in praying for change in the world without putting ourselves out to do something to help make that change. In other words, I must inconvenience myself to make that change. Say, for example, there is no point in praying that your mother-in-law will get well if you don't drive her to the doctor to get some care..... The second is the cross of witness. To carry this cross, we must not be afraid to stand up for what we believe in and be counted. A good example of this witnessing is those people who are involved in social action and justice campaigns. And finally, then, there is the cross of martyrdom. And this comes in two forms, wet and dry. Wet is when blood is spilled, like that of Oscar Romero. And dry is when we are wounded in the spirit, and that can happen in so many different ways and on a daily basis.

So it is not surprising, then, like the followers in today's gospel, that there may be other priorities and that there may be all kinds of excuses for not answering the call to discipleship because, as John Dalrymple put it, "It costs not less than everything." Amen.

