

Novena to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart - 31 August to 8 September 2019

OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART: MOTHER-DISCIPLE

Day 9: Sunday, 08 September – 23rd in Ordinary Time

- Wisdom 9:13-18 – the gift of “wisdom”
- Ps 89 – O Lord you have been our refuge from one generation to the next
- Phil 9:10, 12-17 – story of Onesimus, the slave – “I know you have been deprived of Onesimus for a time, but it was only so that you could have him back for ever, not as a slave anymore, but something much better than a slave, a brother.”
- Lk 14:25-33 – radical discipleship – None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions

WILL YOU BE MY DISCIPLE?

We have arrived! We are now on the last day of our Novena. We have been calling this our 9-day pilgrimage with Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and who do we find at the end of our pilgrimage, smiling and welcoming us? Jesus, of course! So we come before Jesus and he says to us - ***“If any one comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes, and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple.”*** What? Lord, we are talking about love in this Novena, not hate. ***“Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”*** Yes, the cross, we had that yesterday, can we skip it today Lord, it is the last day after all? ***Sit down and calculate the cost - “None of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions.”*** Wow...what a way to end our Novena! How do we make sense of Jesus’ radical demands in today’s gospel reading in relation to what we have been reflecting on in the last eight days?

First of all, what does “hate” mean in this reading. Well, the dictionary says “hate” means to “feel intense dislike for.” Its synonyms are loathe, detest, dislike greatly, abhor, etc etc...Is this what Jesus means when he said “hate”? I checked a Jewish annotated New Testament and in the footnote, it simply said – hate- hyperbole – an exaggerated statement or claim not meant to be taken literally. Ah ok. But what does Jesus mean then? Further research clarified this for me. Here is one explanation - “In the Aramaic idiom spoken by Jesus, to love means to carry out one’s obligations faithfully in regard to someone, no matter how one might feel. To hate is to fail to carry out these obligations. To say that you love one person or group and hate another is to say that you choose to carry out your commitments to one in preference to the other when these commitments are in conflict” (Michael Fallon, MSC). So Jesus is saying, you must “prefer” me over the people closest to you, even over your own life. Here is another one - “hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from (Michael Craddock). It may be hyperbole. But it is clear that the call to discipleship is a call to detachment, detachment from that which one loves so deeply including oneself” (Rev Luke A. Powery). So yes, Jesus is not asking his disciples to do something contrary to his commandment to love one another. But he is calling them to detachment, to prefer him over any other.

How about the “cross” that he wants us to carry, what is this all about? In the days of Jesus, a common criminal carried his cross, which is the horizontal beam of the cross, and he carries it to the place where the vertical beam would be standing in the midst of a mad, jeering mob. So one who is carrying his cross is in fact carrying it to his death. This was a familiar sight to his

followers and was probably the image that came to their minds when he said “anyone who does not carry his cross cannot be my disciple.” As if the implication of carrying his cross was not clear enough, Jesus says “carry his cross and **come after me.**” Where was he going? It will help to understand that while Jesus was saying these things, he was on his way to Jerusalem. He was literally on his way to his death. It is in the context of this big journey from Galilee to Jerusalem that he instructs his followers on what discipleship means and entails. The German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote “when Christ calls, he bids come and die.” “Bonhoeffer meant this literally and manifested a congruence between his lip service and his life service...He put his life on the line and eventually was hanged on April 9, 1945 for his opposition to Hitler. ‘When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die.’” (Powery). Many Christians in our world today know this to be true as they are persecuted and killed for their faith in Christ. Bonhoeffer says that “suffering is the badge of true discipleship.” “We bear the weight of the suffering of the world and this invitation from Jesus is not a short-term one-time hoisting up of temporary troubles, but a recurrent life-long carrying of ones cross.” (Powery) Jesus could not let us go from this Novena without making this clear.

In the same way that he told the crowds following him 2000 years ago, he is also telling us today at the end of our Novena to stop first, sit down and calculate the costs before we make a commitment to Him. What is cost of discipleship to Christ – everything we possess, everyone and everything that is important to us, everything including our own lives. “What Jesus is looking for are disciples who having counted the cost and realistically assessed it are ready nonetheless to be his disciples” (Msgr Charles Pope).

When I was reflecting on this text, I realized that Jesus is not asking for something that he himself did not fulfill or experience. The man Jesus left his family in Nazareth to follow God’s call. To use the Aramaic idiom, he hated his father, mother, brothers, sisters, even his very own life to follow God and fulfil his mission. He carried his cross and he gave up everything. He has shown the way...now he says to us - follow me.

Fr Jan Bovenmars, a Dutch MSC, wrote a book on Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in 1996. In the book, he proposes a biblical triptych of OLSH. Three frames containing three scenes from the gospels: the central frame is John 19, Mary at the Foot of the Cross, on one side we have John 2, the Wedding in Cana, and on the other side Acts 1 and 2, Pentecost – so it is Cana-Cross-Cenacle. We have already reflected on these three scenes individually during this Novena. Today, I would like to look at these scenes again in the light of Christ’s radical call to discipleship.

- The first frame, Mary in Cana. When the wine has run out, Mary said to Jesus, they have no wine. *Unless you hate father, mother, brothers, sisters, or your own self, you cannot be my disciple.* Mary, turns to the servants and tells them, he takes priority over anything or anyone, do whatever he tells you.
- The central frame, Mary at the foot of the Cross. There she stands, looking on him whom they have pierced. *If you do not carry your cross and come after me, you cannot be my disciple.* Mary stands there, witnesses her Son’s death and the piercing of his side. She feels that pain and in a sense she dies as she watches her Son die.
- The third frame, Mary in the Cenacle, gathered in prayer with the other disciples of Jesus. *Unless you give up everything you cannot be my disciple.* Mary leaves her household and joins the post-Easter community of Jesus’ believing disciples.

Jesus asked his mother to become his disciple and she said YES.

At the end of our Novena, Jesus addresses us saying – now it is your turn, **will you be my disciple?** We feel our hearts burning within us – there is excitement but also fear. As he patiently waits for our response, he whispers to each of us -

*Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name, you are mine.
Should you pass through the waters, I shall be with you,
Through rivers, they will not swallow you up.
Should you walk through fire, you will not be scorched
and the flame will not burn you.
For I am the Lord your God...your Saviour.
...You are precious in my sight,
You are honoured and I love you.
(Is 43:1-4)*

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