

5th Sunday after Pentecost C (6/27/10 – No Turning Back)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

The text for our meditation on the Word of God this *Fifth Sunday after Pentecost* is from the Holy Gospel appointed for the day – in particular the last two verses. These read: *Yet another said, “I will follow You, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”* [Lk 9.61-62] Thus far the Word of the Lord.

This text can be a bit perplexing – even consternating and distressing. Taken together with Christ’s earlier word: *Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God* [9.60] – these verses could give us the impression that our Lord advocates ... perhaps even demands ... cutting off **all** family ties and responsibilities in order to follow Him. The questions that immediately come to mind when reading our text are these: *Was it wrong for the one man to want to go back home and bury his father before following after Christ? Was it wrong for the other man to want to say “Goodbye”? Why does our loving, compassionate Savior seem so terribly intent – even harsh – here to these would-be disciples? And what about us? What about our family and other daily-life activities? Are they wrong? Just how should we understand this Word of our Lord?*

Now to apply this text properly to ourselves – and the way the Holy Spirit has recorded it **does very much** invite us to consider how it applies to **us** – we need to understand a bit better the cultural context in which our Savior speaks these words. The first saying of our Lord is fairly straightforward. A man is drawn to the Kingdom of God. Scripture does not tell us how, precisely. Did he hear the Word from the messengers Jesus sent ahead to that Samaritan village as *He set His face to go to Jerusalem* [9.51-52]? Did he hear Jesus Himself preach? Did he simply see something in the lives of those disciples gathered around Jesus – not the thunderous condemnation and calling down fire from heaven of James and John [9.54] ... but – a genuinely concerned kindness ... a calm and sureness even in the midst of trying times ... a certain peace and tranquility regarding the future?

Curious to us is that Jesus immediately lays out before the man what we

would call “the cost of discipleship.” Our Lord does not pull any punches – soften any blows. *You want to follow Me*, says our Lord ... but in picturesque language, *then consider that I am a rejected, suffering Savior. I do not have a place to stay, because not only the Samaritans but also My own nation will so utterly disown Me that I will be condemned, crucified, and laid in the grave.* Jesus seems way out of line here – at least from our post-modern way of thinking and working hard **not** to offend **anyone** in **any** way ... indeed, going out of our way to accommodate even the most wrong-headed thinking regarding Christ and His Church **in** the Church to make them feel right at home. He could at least say something like: *I am so glad you want to follow Me. Understand, though, that things may not always be smooth and easy for you as My disciple. There may be difficult times ... sometimes. But, as they say, the benefits are out of this world.*

In the second saying, it is the Lord Jesus Who calls – commands – the man to follow Him. And, again, Jesus’ response to his seemingly reasonable request to **first go and bury** [his] **father** [9.59] is “over the top” – at least to our way of thinking. **Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.** [9.60] There is more to this man’s request than at first meets our Western ear. In the Middle East – especially in Jesus’ day ... but even today in many parts – society expects the son to provide for and take care of his parents until they are quite literally “dead and buried.” If this son’s father had already died, he would have been taking care of the wake and burial arrangements at the time Jesus came to him – not standing **along the road** as verse 57 indicates. This man is telling Jesus that he wants to go back home, take care of his father for a good many years – 10, 20, 30 years maybe – and **then** he will follow Him. This age-old response is still around today: *When I am a bit older and things have settled down – when my children are older ... when my career has advanced – THEN I will go to church and pay more attention to spiritual matters.* Haven’t you heard that from your family, friends or neighbors? Haven’t you felt that excuse yourself sometimes – *I’ll get to God later?*

In the third instance, we again have a person who is drawn to and desires to follow Jesus. And once again, we do not know how he came to know about Christ. This man wishes to follow Jesus, but he would **first say**

farewell to those at [his] *home* [9.61]. This seems innocent enough. Our Savior's response seems overly harsh – again. However, we might better render the man's words this way: *I will follow You, Lord, but let me first take leave of those at my house.* That is to say, the man would first go home and get **permission** from his family – most especially his father – to follow Jesus. Even today, such loyalty and obedience to the father is part of Middle Eastern culture. In the most modernized places, this “taking leave” might seem to be a mere formality. A businessman being transferred by his company might travel a good distance into the countryside to let his parents know – take his leave, as it were ... and receive their approval and blessing. In our text, if the father and family should refuse – well, then the man would have considered himself free of his vow to serve Christ.

There are certainly times when we see that we have not really considered “the cost of discipleship” – like the first man who was drawn to Christ. At least we **act** as if we did not know. When we suffer any sort of persecution or trial and tribulation for our faith, we are surprised ... and distressed. We sometimes feel there is too much suffering coming our way. *I did not sign up for this. I did not realize this was in store. I was looking for glory – already now. Does Christ not promise us abundant life? Peace? Health? Eternal life?* But if the very Son of God was thus rejected, mistreated, and crucified by His creation, why should we expect any less? We not only have the word here regarding rejection, but also the saying of our Lord elsewhere: *A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.* [MT 10.24] At times, after putting our hand to the plow, we look back. We long for our previous life ... apart from Christ – anything to rid ourselves of difficulties. We place family, society, career, wealth, health – you name it – ahead of Christ ... ahead of following Him weekly by attending the *Divine Service* ... ahead of following Him daily by devotional reading of His Word and prayer. We make ourselves **unfit** for the Kingdom of God [9.62].

So it is **not** that we cannot take care of family ... or friends ... or community ... or job – but that we place them **first** ... fail to crucify our flesh [GAL 5.24] ... fear, love, and trust in them **foremost**. **That** is our problem ... far too often. If we are going to *live* (in Christ) *by means of the Spirit*, then we must also *walk* (after Christ) *by means of the Spirit*

[GAL 5.25]. For we neither place our hand on the plow ... nor are able to keep at the task in diligence ... nor are able to plow the straight furrow of righteousness **except** by the Holy Spirit of Christ – Who works in us ***both to will and to do for His good pleasure*** by means of Word and Sacrament [PHI 2.13]. If we are to follow Jesus – both now and forever – we cannot look to our own good intentions and resolve. Rather, we must always and only look straight ahead to Him Who willingly put His hand to the plow and **never** looked back. We must continually look to our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Son knew “the cost of discipleship” – the cost of following and submitting to the will of God the Father. Yet in steadfast service to the Triune will – **for the eternal salvation of all mankind** – the Son descended from heaven and took into Himself our human flesh. Christ knew He would have ***nowhere to lay His head*** [9.58] – that He would be spurned at every turn ... by every people. Still He put His hand to the plow and refused to look back. Instead, ***He set His face to go to Jerusalem***. There He would endure not only ultimate rejection and suffering from sinful men – even the majority of His Own family and community – but also being forsaken by the Father as He bore and took away in His flesh the sins of the whole world on the Cross ... **for you and for me**. Christ allowed the spiritually dead to crucify Him and send Him to His grave. And by His Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God **to you**.

In Christ you have a place to lay your head – eternally in heaven. For Christ has plowed the way there – in the perfectly straight furrows of His very Own righteousness. And He calls you to follow Him where He has gone. The way is not always easy – but it is always sure ... the end guaranteed. ***For freedom Christ has set us free*** [GAL 5.1]. You are free from the ***yoke of slavery*** of your sin. You are free from the consuming fire of God’s wrath [LK 9.54]. ***For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him***. [JN 3.17] Because Christ ***set His face to go to Jerusalem***, the Father looks upon you with great love, joy, and peace. Out of steadfast love and faithfulness, your Savior has made you a fit citizen of the Kingdom of God.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]