

Homily Sunday 23C: 8 Sept 2013: HT-W/XII-PC

Now and then I have trouble getting to sleep; usually it is followed by trouble getting up the next day, so there is a weird symmetry about it all. One remedy that sometimes helps is a little light reading before turning in. Recently I read a novel about a young college freshman, a very intelligent and dedicated student who earns a scholarship to a prestigious university back east. This young lady is from a poor working class family in a small town. She struggles to fit into her new surroundings where she is shocked by the drinking, partying, and rampant hedonism of her well-to-do peers. Much of the drama revolves around the protagonist's attempt to adapt to her environment without neglecting her studies or losing her virtue. The story captures the struggle confronting many young Catholics entering into the world outside the family home. I fear that today's youth lack direction for life. They enter a culture where the notion of what a person ought to grow up to be is unclear. Oh, there's some idea that you should be a good person, but goodness isn't defined; nor are there role models who enjoy general approval. You probably should get a job and make money. Maybe you're encouraged to get married and have a family, but maybe not. A vocation to religion or ministry is off the radar screen for most. There's not a big picture for the future being presented to youth, beyond vague exhortations to follow their dreams. Be nice, have fun, then you die, and that's that. It's understandable that college life often degenerates into a great big bacchanalia: eat, drink, be merry.

In today's gospel, the Lord provides his hearers with direction. Take up your cross and follow me, he says. For unbelievers, this passage may reinforce their gloomy vision of Church life. Follow Jesus so you can be miserable! But read more carefully, there is more to it. This passage gives orientation for life, a direction that the world doesn't supply. The overarching goal of Christian life should be following the Lord Jesus. And all other decisions have to be reconciled w/ that and conformed to that. So the harsh words about hating one's family; it's more accurate to translate it as making family take 2nd place to Jesus. So our dreams and hopes have to be fit within the framework of discipleship, which may require renouncing certain options that don't correspond to our particular Christian vocation or are simply incompatible w/ being a good Catholic. The Lord doesn't gloss over the hardships entailed in following him--hence the language of the cross and the strict demands for renunciation & self-denial. But the Lord also offers the hope of resurrection, that state of perfect peace and joy that the world cannot give, a condition whose blessedness exceeds the wildest aspirations of the human heart. The world, by contrast, promises us fleeting delight in this life only: its ephemeral pleasures often lead to disappointment and misery, and sometimes the pleasure isn't all that pleasant. Let's pray that this Eucharist will help us see Christ more clearly and inspire us to follow him more closely.