

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Great crowds were traveling with Jesus.” He’s on his way to Jerusalem. What were they doing there with him?

That seems to be the question Jesus has, and the issue he addresses in cautioning them about the costs of being a disciple. It’s not that easy. It’s not something we can do on a lark, or as a result of a romantic inspiration. It will require diligence and counting the cost to see if we are actually up to it.

What if we’re not? In today’s Gospel Jesus actually seems to be inviting us to consider not being a disciple. The examples he uses, for the person considering building a tower, or of the king contemplating going to battle, both allow for the possibility that the person in question will arrive at the conclusion that they can’t afford the cost.

Then what? Do without the tower? Ask for peace terms?

How does that correspond to the question about following Jesus? Is he really giving us an option not to follow him? And if we take that route, what’s likely to happen?

You know, this scenario actually played out in Jesus’ life as he continued to school those who would follow him about what all they were getting into.

In St. John’s Gospel the moment of truth came when Jesus’ spoke to them about him being the bread of life: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day.”

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

St. John writes, “As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

On that occasion he turned to the 12 and asked if they were going to leave, too. Peter’s response rings true to me about the ultimate motivation for accepting the challenge of following Jesus, and of properly factoring in all the costs and benefits when determining whether we are going to accept the invitation.

Peter says, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”

The uncompromising character of Jesus’ speech about what it costs to follow him has to be weighed against the impossibility of us saving ourselves.

That’s the one thing all those people traveling with Jesus had in common. They knew they lacked something that Jesus could provide, and that something was going to address the deep wound they carried with them. Nothing else would touch it. There was no other remedy for it.

Only Jesus could lead them forward into salvation.

Who of us would want to choose not to be saved, to be left behind while others moved with Jesus into life with God? We would be left without a plan B. We would be lost.

Ultimately, that reality belongs to the calculation we have to make. That’s what counterbalances the

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

struggles that following Jesus brings with it.

St. Paul, who bought into the cost of being saved by Jesus, put it this way:

“I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Left to our own devices we will never make it. But we are not left to our own devices. The way of discipleship can be journeyed because of the strengthening and saving power of the Spirit of Jesus.

The calculation we have to make ultimately boils down to one thing: Do we trust that God will carry us through if we give our lives over to him? It's not a matter of our fitness for the journey so much as it is a matter of our willingness to be led through the rough terrain, with crosses of every shape and size present all over the place.

If we recognize that the cross is really a door, and that Jesus has gone through it and conquered it, then we will recognize that the costs of discipleship, as real as they are, pay off richly, in this life already, but even more so in the life of the world to come.