

Sermon – The Agony and the Ecstasy

Today's gospel reading is a difficult one; and its difficult in more ways than one. For one thing, it's difficult to understand, at least in certain places; for another it's a difficult teaching to apply in life – there are some very demanding challenges in it.

By way of introduction, let me say that, in reading the Bible, it's always important to see the broader context of a passage in order to understand it correctly. What is the context of this passage? If you look at the beginning of this chapter, you will see that it begins with a list of the 12 disciples. It tells how Jesus sent these twelve out to proclaim the Gospel; its about Jesus' followers involved in mission in the world.

So, this passage refers particularly to the context of serving Jesus and fulfilling His mission in the world. If my discipleship is just about a cosy relationship between me and Jesus, and nothing more, I am unlikely to experience any of the challenges He mentions. But if I am serious about my discipleship and my mission in the world, there is a good chance I will experience some of the things Jesus speaks about here.

What are those things? The first one is in vs 24,25: Jesus says in effect that a disciple should expect some of the same treatment as the one that s/he is following. The servant shouldn't expect things to be easier than they are for the master; the disciple shouldn't expect an easier time than the teacher.

My dad was always an avid fisherman. From a young age I decided I wanted to follow in his fishing footsteps. But I soon discovered that if I was going to do that, I had to do the same things he did. And that wasn't all fun stuff. It meant things like getting up at 4.30 or 5 in the morning or walking long distances to get to the best fishing spots or getting wet from the sea while fishing from the rocks. And if I caught a fish, I had to clean it myself.

In a far deeper way, the same is true when we follow Jesus and become fishers of men and women. Jesus says, they called me all sorts of nasty things, and you shouldn't expect anything less. He experienced misunderstanding and opposition and we shouldn't be surprised if the same happens to us. Like the fishing, it may at times mean discomfort or disappointment, and it will require perseverance and stamina.

Jesus warns that this persecution may lead to physical suffering and even to death. And we know that it ultimately did for most of those disciples. But rather that, says Jesus, than retaining your physical life and losing your soul. 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul', He says.

And linked to that, is one of Jesus' most challenging statements: 'Those who try to gain their own life will lose it; but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' These words of Jesus appear 6 times in the Gospels – more than any other statement that Jesus uttered. The Message translation puts it like this, 'If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and Me.'

Jim Elliot, a missionary to Ecuador in the 1950's said this, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, in order to gain what he cannot lose.' Those words became tragically true for him, when he and a colleague were murdered by a tribe they had reached out to in the jungles of Ecuador.

'Let us give what we cannot keep, in order to gain what we cannot lose.' That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it. Letting go of our lives, in order to discover true life in Christ. Enduring the agony in order to experience the ecstasy. But how difficult it can be in practice - how difficult to see the bigger picture; to take the longer view of things. How hard it is sometimes to make sacrifices in the present in order to gain longer term benefits. But that's what Christian discipleship is often about. Jesus spoke about denying ourselves and taking up our cross as we follow Him. Taking up our cross means taking up a difficult task or embarking on a difficult road at times.

Hebrews 12 says of Jesus, 'For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, despising its shame, and He is now seated at the Father's right hand in glory. The agony of the cross for the sake of the ecstasy beyond it.'

In our reading, Jesus says that some of those challenges and sacrifices may come from within our own family. He speaks about tensions and opposition that may arise from those closest to us. Jesus is not saying that His way is intended to cause such division, but He is warning that the *effect* of following Him may be conflict, including within the family. But the conflict isn't being initiated by Jesus or His followers, but rather by others in their response to him and to those who follow him.

And when it does occur, how terribly painful it can be – to experience the rejection of mother or father or brother or child – because of one's decision to follow Jesus. But ultimately, all other loyalties must give way to loyalty to Christ, regardless of the consequences. Obviously, we must love and honour our loved ones, but our love and allegiance to Jesus come first.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, felt this tension very deeply when he was imprisoned for his faith, leaving his wife and children to fend on their own – and one of those children was blind. He wrote, 'I felt like a man pulling his house down upon the head of his wife and children; yet thought I, I must do it, I must do it!'

All of this seems very inappropriate for Father's Day, doesn't it? And yet not entirely. For one thing there are those whose relationship with their father was indeed one of conflict and pain, rather than of care and support. But mainly, this passage can be seen as appropriate on this day as it reminds us of the truest and best of all Fathers - our heavenly Father.

'Do not fear, says Jesus, when these things happen, because you have a heavenly Father who cares for you more than you can know. Think of the sparrows', says Jesus, 'they are so plentiful, yet your Heavenly Father cares about every single one of them? Not one of them falls to the ground without His knowledge. If He cares that much about the sparrows, how much more will he not care for you?'

John Chrysostom was the church leader of Constantinople, when the Church was undergoing severe persecution from the Romans. The Roman emperor had John arrested and charged for being a Christian. If Chrysostom did not renounce Christ, then the emperor would have this Christian leader banished from the kingdom. Chrysostom responded to the threat by saying, 'You could never do that because the whole world is my Father's kingdom.' Next, threatened with the loss of his worldly treasures, this saint replied, 'You cannot do that, for my treasure is in heaven where my heart is.' 'Then,' replied the emperor, 'I will take away your life.' To which Chrysostom said, 'You cannot, for my life is hidden with Christ in God.'

'Jesus says, 'Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven... Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' So, 'Let us give what we cannot keep, in order to gain what we cannot lose.'