

SPG#141, Season after Pentecost C, P. 18

September 9, 2007 -- Fr. Charles Pope

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

Over the years, as I have studied the scriptures, I have observed that there is a kind of prioritizing that goes on. And that has to do with what a reader thinks is most important in the scripture. As the Bible is made up of different kinds of literature from different time periods, what in all of it is to be considered primary above all else. Early in my life I decided, and heard others say, that if the words being read come out of the mouth of Jesus, then that scripture must be considered primary above all else. I can recall many times when dealing with something out of the Old Testament, we would contrast and compare that reading with something Jesus said in the New Testament. This seemed to make sense as the teaching of Jesus is supposed to be a fulfillment or a completion of what is taught in the Old Testament. So this approach of focusing on the primacy of the words of Jesus has worked pretty well over the years.

The only problem is that sometimes the words of Jesus went beyond just corroborating this teaching or that teaching. Sometimes we found that the words of Jesus, beyond fitting into our system of comparison, took on an autonomy that was disturbing if not provocative. So, I think, if I read tendencies in myself and others correctly, there has been a tendency to minimize those words of Jesus that did not fit into our neat system.

Take today's gospel, for example. Jesus says to a large crowd, **Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.**

Wherever you are in your consideration of the scripture, if you have not been around these words ever or recently, at first reading one is aghast. What in the world! Jesus is saying that to follow him I must hate my father and mother!? I must hate life itself?!

But then as you read on, it does not get any better. For then Jesus says, **For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?**

When you put that query next to his statement about hating one's father and mother, it is possible to be overwhelmed by what seems paradoxical or even outrageous. For on the one hand Jesus seems to metaphorically be calling for radical devotion, radical loyalty. To follow him to the extent of hating loved ones. But on the other, he seems to be saying, you need to count the cost, to see if you really want to follow me.

At this point many readers are tempted to turn away and admit defeat. Here is another one of those puzzling sayings that I am just not able to comprehend. But, if you are patient with yourself and the scripture, you will notice a calling, a challenge to grapple with these words toward a deeper understanding.

It is of value, I think, to consider a challenging passage as this one from different vantage points. First, if you consider the paradox "from above," you consider what Jesus seemed to be calling for in placing two seemingly contradictory statements together.

He seemed to be calling for people to follow him passionately, with abandon and with devotion. He seemed to be calling for a radical loyalty that is beyond the “usual” relationships with loved ones. He seemed to be calling people to love God in the same faithful and expanding way that God loves us. At the same time, he seemed to be calling people to employ their intelligence about this following. He always seemed to be calling us to “count the cost.” Within radical following we could perhaps translate “counting the cost” into the more contemporary phrase of “keeping your head up and your eyes open.” And so, in considering his words from the vantage point of “above,” or from Jesus’ own vantage point, he seems to be calling us to both. He seems to be calling us to radical devotion, and he seems to be calling us to be smart about following.

From the vantage point of the disciples, they perhaps had the same struggles we do with his words. At one point in the gospels we can hear one of them say, **We have left everything to follow you.** At another point we hear one of them saying, **I will follow you. But first let me go and bury my father.** In both instances Jesus responds with a call to unprecedented devotion.

From the vantage point of the reader, or the hearer, since the words we consider are objectified in print, we have the “convenience” of being able to dispassionately accept or reject the words as appropriate or not appropriate, as interesting or boring, as true and meaningful or not worthy of consideration. Perhaps it is easy for some hearers and readers to relegate Jesus’ words to some kind of rarefied spirituality that has little meaning for real life.

For many of us, and perhaps for all of us at different times, what we consider to be “real life” is the litmus test for everything. So, if some spirituality out of scripture does not easily fit into schedules, bill paying, and everyday life, then it simply is of no consequence. And so for the hearer/reader who insists on the primacy of everyday life, there really is no deliverance from slavery of routine and demands, other than enduring them.

For other hearers/readers, who realize that the spirituality of Christ breaks in upon everything, threatening all that is legalistic and oppressive, those are able to hear the salvation in the words. But no one should say that there are not struggles in our lives.

For we do wrestle with a variety of real and thorny concerns. For those I would offer a spiritual recipe. And we will not go into how well I can cook.

Before you leave home in the morning, in your mind, put your real and thorny problem in a spiritual slow cooker. Along with the problem, put in the words, **I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me**. Also put in the very best ingredients of your own faith that you can think of. Perhaps you might put in some of your hope and some of your patience and some of your love. Perhaps some brief but powerful prayers. Bring the cooker to a low boil, then turn it down to simmer for the whole day. And then go about your day, and realize that whatever needs to happen in the cooker is happening. After supper that evening, sit down, and in your mind, turn off the cooker, remove the problem from the cooker and put it on a spiritual plate. And then make observations about how things seem. Perhaps the problem may seem different, and you cannot really put it into words. Perhaps an insight might come the next day, or even later.

Perhaps there is an immediate “Aha!” Whatever the result you can know that in your life in Christ you spiritualized the problem in an attempt to get an answer to something that seemed impossible. You can know that out of your faith you hoped for what was not seen.

Why on earth would I end the sermon with a recipe? Because in our cooking and in our living, via the gospel, we are called to such radical, outrageous and uncommon faith in Christ, even in the face of dark despair. And at the same time we are called to be smart, to use our God given intelligence. May our uncommon faith thaw that which is frozen in despair. May our faith cause us to be even smarter than we are now. And may we follow Christ as we have never followed before. Amen.