

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

Oh, Sweet Jesus where have you gone? You are saying some hard things here. Hate father and mother; carry the cross; give up all your possessions! These are hard words. No wonder many have walked away from you. Yes, I know that these are either/or Semitic ways of making a statement. Yes, I know that you are asking for my commitment to you, my being one with you in my very identity. Yes, I know, even though these demands may not be felt personally, still to follow you can be an all or nothing choice at times. You ask me to be a follower and not just a fan.

Let's look at this demand in the light of what is happening in our country. The number of people who really believe in God has decreased considerably and atheists are more outspoken. Those who have been Catholics, as well as other adherents of different Religions, are decreasing as well. Those identified as "nones," on the other hand, are increasing considerably. And those who remain fall into many categories. There are many committed believers and I know many of you are in that group. But there are many who hang on, go to church occasionally, and continue to believe without really examining what it is they believe. The God whom they have followed doesn't excite them. The God whom some of them no longer believe in, as many atheists too, I would not believe in either. Apathy and indifference easily become the rule of life.

It seems to me that we are really getting back to the early days of the church. The Jewish synagogue rejected this new sect. The Roman empire was threatened by its refusal to bow down to the Emperor as divine. Today Empire is present in capitalism, big business, the economic and political world that has no room for those who would follow the carpenter from Nazareth. It is often the poor, the persecuted minorities, those who suffer from neglect in the main cultural system who heed the message of the kingdom of God.

So the gospel confronts us today to make a decision. For me, this decision is not centered on whether we follow an imperfect and sinful church or not. There are many issues about the Church that demand attention and change. We are only at the beginning of the true reform of the church through the work of Pope Francis and the forthcoming Synod.

But there is something else that comes first. I choose to remain Christian, above all, because of Jesus Christ. It is my relation to him that is my anchor. Rather than talking about being a disciple of Jesus, I suggest we speak of coming home when we become one with him. We find who we really are when we accept him and, by thus accepting our humanity, we become divine with him. Everything else follows.

Many of us Catholic Christians have not really known, less love, Jesus very well. If you would be asked, "Who is Jesus?" I wonder whether you would answer, as many do, that of course he is God, the second person of the Trinity. While this is true, it effectively ends any intimate relation with Jesus. For who knows what the word God means? We immediately push Jesus back out of our experience. We may adore him but do not listen to him or follow him. God is rather absolute mystery to us. It is the irony, but also the blessing, that taking Jesus' humanity seriously we gain insights to what it might mean to be divine.

So, today, I want to invite you to a challenge. It is Labor Day, the beginning of a new school year. How about setting aside some time to come to know Jesus? It can be weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, whatever works. It can be done in many ways in many forms with different books. Here is my suggestion. Spend some time reading a gospel, maybe the Gospel of Mark because it is the oldest, the shortest, the most active portrayal of Jesus. Read it as though you were one of the first to be called, man or woman, and you are getting to know Jesus. You do not know he is God; put that aside. Feel the magnetism of this man and the power of his wisdom and insights; or maybe feel your confusion about him, even your disagreement with him. His words about the cross and dying in order to live may scare you. But be open and listen.

Let me repeat how this can be done. Read a short passage of the gospel and read it aloud. Stop and be quiet. Think about and feel what you have heard. Then read the passage again. This could be even more effectively done if you do it with a few others. In this case, read it aloud; observe some silence; let anyone briefly comment on what he or she has heard without discussion; so share what it has said to you or what you are feeling; read the passage again. Again, remember you are reading as one not knowing this is God, even if the text calls him son of God. Pay attention to what his humanity is saying to you.

If you are faithful to this reading you will eventually come to chapter eight where Jesus asks us, "Who do you say that I am?" It will be a time to be honest and

perhaps know we are still trying to know and love Jesus. But if we persist, that persistence alone is a sign that we are coming closer to something for which we deeply yearn.

Do not be afraid. "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

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