

Psalm 23 1 St. Peter 2:19-25 St. John 10:11-16

Suffering Servants

There is this wonderful dialogue between our Lord and a few would be followers at the end of the ninth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. The first person approached Him and said bravely, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." To which Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He called another to follow Him, but this one said that he first wanted to go and bury his father. Jesus' answer to this excuse (which, by the way, was probably not about an imminent burial, but rather a way of saying "let me stay put until my familial obligations are complete", which may have been many years in the future!) was, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." Then, yet another hopeful approached Him and said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." And Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." From these replies, it seems He to Whom all hearts are open looked beyond the apparent "good intentions" and saw a deep seated reluctance to give up anything at all for the advance of God's Kingdom.

You see, just a few verses earlier, Jesus had made it abundantly clear that He was about to suffer and if anyone wanted to follow in His footsteps they would have to be prepared to suffer too. It is a well-known statement. "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him stand up for his rights, and not let anyone use him as a doormat, and take up his petition and press on to achieve self-actualization and self-aggrandizement." That's not what it says, is it? No, Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and

take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” And that final statement, “follow Me”, is clearly defined by the preceding verse. “The Son of Man must suffer many things,” Jesus told His disciples, “and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.” This is the context in which He then said, “If anyone desires to come after Me...let him follow Me.”

Now, if one looks at the Modern Church in general, you may be forgiven for thinking that Jesus never made such a statement. Indeed, one may wonder if the many verses regarding self-sacrifice have ever been read, much less applied by most Christians today. How many times are we not told in Scripture to do good to those who hate us and spitefully use us, to forgive those who sin against us, to esteem others better than ourselves, to be servants, to be the least...not to mention the fact that the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself is second only to the command to love God! And yet, how many of us love anyone...and we are even talking about our enemies here...but anyone as much as we love ourselves? How many of us really know the full meaning of servanthood? How many of us who claim to be followers of Jesus know what to follow Him really means? How many of us really know Him much less know where He is leading us?

Besides the obvious fact that some Christians simply do not know their Bibles well enough to honestly say that they know what it says about the character of Jesus, the shameful truth is that many Christians *do* know, but what they know about Jesus doesn't exactly fit in with their goals in life. In one breath Jesus says that we ought to be like Him...all fine and well, but then in the very next He says that He lays down His life for others. He tells us that if we want to dare to take His Name upon ourselves (in other

words to call ourselves CHRISTians) we must learn not to be like the pagans in this world who all want to be top dog. Rather, we who choose to walk in His footsteps must grasp the truth that the greatest of us in His Kingdom will be everyone else's servant. You see, many Christians know this teaching...if they haven't read it for themselves, they have at least heard someone say it, most likely from the pulpit of some Pastor or Priest who still believes that we actually ought to strive to live according to how God has told us to live in the Scriptures...they know this teaching, but they don't like it because it interferes with what they want out of life. It gets in the way of their own plans and their own enjoyment. They read the 23rd Psalm and love the "lead me by still waters" bit, but try their level best to avoid the "valley of the shadow of death" part.

And then there's this troublesome verse in our Epistle reading for today in which St. Peter implies that it is actually God's will for us to suffer! Well, what about the "goodness and mercy" that's supposed to follow me all the days of my life? Doesn't God want to me to be healthy, wealthy and wise? Besides, what about my right to the pursuit of happiness?

Dearest brethren, the Scriptures teach us that the cost of true discipleship is high...and if you stop to think about it long enough, you would realize that you really would not want it to be any other way. After all, we all know that you get what you pay for...and while salvation is free to us, it cost our Lord His life. Is it too much then to ask that we dedicate our lives to Him to live as He requires us to live? You see, He has not freed us to live as we please, but to live as pleases Him. He didn't deliver us from sin so that we might continue to live in sin (only without the dire consequences, of course)...how convenient...but that misses the point of liberation entirely. True freedom is to live well

within the parameters which God has provided because to do so is to live according to our design. To live any other way will either hurt us, or others or God.

In the section of St. Peter's 1st Epistle chosen for this 2nd Sunday after Easter, St. Peter lays down some practical rules for life in the kingdom of God. The portion we read from this morning actually has to do with household servants. There has been a lot written about the identity of these servants because St. Peter uses a different Greek word than that which is usually used. In stead of using the word *doulos* or slave, he uses the word *oiketai* or domestic servant. Add to this the fact that this letter was written to Christian Jews of the dispersion, we may conclude that the domestic servants addressed here may have been kinsmen to those whom they served, and therefore ought to have been treated according to the Mosaic Law relating to those who were forced to go into indentured service due to poverty. The idea then would be to serve their more fortunate brethren regardless of whether they followed this law or not. They were not to appeal to their so-called rights under the law, but rather to serve in spite of undeserved harsh treatment.

This willingness to suffer as servants in the pursuit of doing what is right is commendable to God because it illustrates a change of will with regard to the servant and this illustration further serves as an example to all who observe. Submissive service even in the midst of suffering declares that the suffering servant is willing to forgo the perfectly normal desire to retaliate...to give evil for evil...to get even. The latter is the way of the world...if we are to portray the power of God in our lives, we will have to show that He has actually and really set us free from our natural and yet sinful instincts. And what better time to demonstrate His power than when everything within us cries out for vengeance or justice or fairness? What baffles and, indeed, attracts the world is not

necessarily our faith in the resurrected Jesus, but rather the way in which this faith has changed the manner in which we react to the many ups and downs of life. The opposite can be said with regard to what repulses the world...you know, the world is quick to spot hypocrisy and oftentimes...not always, but oftentimes their accusing fingers are well deserved. If we claim (remember we are the ones making the claim, not them) to follow Jesus and are yet in step with the world, we are the worst of hypocrites because our lives serve to drive people away from God rather than to attract them to Him.

It really is easy to go with the flow, you know...to follow the stream of the majority...because you have their momentum to rely on. But to go against the flow...to follow the minority out of conviction...that is completely different. If you do that, you will suffer. It is said that the one thing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Mahatma Gandhi and our Lord Jesus Christ all had in common was the fact that they were all killed for insisting that we love each other. It was also the Mahatma, by the way, who said that he liked our Christ, but did not like us because we were not like our Christ. Now, whether you like these comparisons or not makes no difference to the bottom line which is this: Do you walk exactly as Jesus walked, even when you have to suffer for it? Are you like the Christ you claim to believe in? Even when you are misunderstood, or maligned, or falsely accused, or misrepresented by those who have chosen to go the easier way? Are you a servant to all? Do you love your enemies? (And by the way, if you say yes, when is the last time you prayed for the salvation of Osama Bin Laden?) Or to come a little close to home...when is the last time you invited that person you simply cannot stand into your home for lunch, or for tea or for supper?

Really, dearest brethren, what are we here for? To serve ourselves? Is that why Jesus laid down His life for us? To build our own little kingdoms? To enjoy life as much as we can before we exit this world? Why are we here? Why are you here? Why do you call yourself a follower of Jesus if you are not following Him? All the excuses offered to Jesus by those who wanted to serve themselves before they committed to serving Him were and still are dismissed by our Lord as unacceptable. Jesus came to reconcile the world to Himself by suffering and dying for it...and this, St. Peter said, He did as an example to us. To show us how we, in turn, are meant to exercise the ministry of reconciliation in our own spheres of influence. Dearest brethren, if our Lord laid down His life for us, should we not lay down our lives for our brethren too? And yet we struggle to bring ourselves to serve others even within the safe confines of our own parish!

Now, in the next few weeks, we will be going through the Mission Statement of our Church and asking whether we really are what we claim to be. This statement was adopted by our Vestry on the Feast Day of St. Matthew, September 21, 2006 because we believed then that it was biblical and reasonable. If we were wrong at that time, we will need to readdress the issue, but we simply cannot have the statement on our walls if we do not live according to what we say we are, can we now?

So, dearest brethren, as you prepare your hearts to come to His Table of mercy and grace, I ask you to examine yourselves before our Lord...ask Him to show you whether or not you have His heart...whether you have His mind...whether you have His character...whether You are like the One you claim to follow. And be mindful of His replies to those who offered excuses if you are tempted to excuse yourself. And then,

once you have gone through this exercise, ask Him to show you how you can follow Him more clearly in your service to others on a daily basis. Indeed, ask Him to bring opportunities for service across your path so that by your Christ-like actions, you might reflect Him before those who may not yet know Him.

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