

# PREPARATION FOR THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS

*Fr. Bob Bedard – September 7, 1986 – St. Mary's Church*

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ord. Time, Year C – Wisdom 9:13-18, Philemon 9-17, Luke 14:25-33

*“One day in early autumn the community received its name. It was during Sunday high Mass that Fr. Bob’s homily included the phrase ‘companions of the Cross’. Although he did not use it with any reference to the community, several brothers in attendance that day said to themselves, ‘That’s it. That’s our name!’ It was quickly discerned that this was what the Lord would have the community called.” (We Are Called to Be Companions of the Cross, p. 127)*

I think the Gospel that we have today needs a little explanation. Jesus uses some pretty strong language. Let’s try and get the picture. He was mobbed by people. There were thousands and thousands of people who followed Him around, pushing and shoving, pressing in upon him at every side. If you think we’re a little crowded here, it was nothing compared to the crowds that followed Him.

And I’m sure a lot of them were impressed by his gentle demeanor, His friendliness, His peacefulness, His love, His charm. And I’m sure perhaps a lot more were very impressed with the incredible Good News that He proclaimed: that life forever with God is an invitation extended to every single human being - the best news that’s ever been spoken! I’m sure a lot of people were impressed by that. But let’s face it, I think most of them followed Him because of what He *did*. He healed the sick. He set people free. The power of God was manifested through Jesus, the eternal Son of God, in amazing ways, *spectacular* ways! And I assume that most of the people who followed Him, followed Him because of that, because of what He could *do* for them.

There were a bunch of people, maybe a few perhaps, maybe a couple of hundred, that followed Him around all the time. They had left everything to follow Him. These were the disciples or the followers of Jesus. And I could imagine on this occasion that some of these other thousands were saying, “Hey, let’s do that. What does it cost to follow you, sir? Show us what we must do to become followers like these other few.” And I think it was on that type of occasion, that type of circumstance, that He addressed these words. And He used some very strong stuff. He said, “You can’t be my follower unless you hate your father and mother, unless you hate your brothers and sisters and yourself included. Then you can follow me. You can’t be my disciple or my follower, or the kind I want, unless you give away all your possessions.”

That’s pretty strong stuff! Did he really mean we’re supposed to hate people? I would think obviously not, but what He was saying was, “Everybody and everything has got to take second place to Me, if you’re going to follow Me, because that’s who the Father has sent Me to be – is your Saviour, your Lord, and your King. And if you want to know what it’s going to cost you to follow me, it’s going to cost you everything.” That’s what He’s saying. He’s talking about what I guess I would call radical discipleship.

And He goes on to use a couple of examples there. He talks about a fellow building a tower. The tower that He means us to understand is the great human project of total human fulfillment, perfect happiness, life with God on high, and so on. That’s the tower that all of us want to build.

That's the project and He says, in that little example, "If you want to build that tower and build it the right way, then you had better know what the cost is." I think He's saying He really isn't all that interested in casual followers, those that'll come once in a while, those that will follow Him when things are going all right, but rather those that will follow Him no matter what it costs, even if it will cost them their whole lives. He's talking about *radical* discipleship.

Now, we've got to preach that. I have to say that again and again. I'm under obedience, I believe, to the Lord to say that. But, you know, I didn't always do that. I didn't always preach radical following of Jesus. And I'm not sure how widely among us today it is preached. But I didn't do it because, first of all, I was afraid most people wouldn't accept it. Secondly, I was afraid they would think I was a bit off the wall, or extreme. And believe me, I treasured my reputation, which by this time is pretty well shot and gone. Thirdly, I wondered really if I was living it myself. And fourthly, I kind of made everything all right for myself by saying, "Maybe Jesus didn't really *mean* it."

But I preach it now, I do, in season and out of season, as St. Paul says, because I'm convinced, first of all, that Jesus *did* mean it and He still means it, and He means it for you and for me. Secondly, I'm doing it because I'm living it now. I've told the Lord I'll do whatever He wants. And He has led me as a result of that into all kinds of things that I would never have anticipated, and never perhaps wanted, and perhaps would have run away from had I known. But I know that it works, thirdly. It's good. It's the only way to go: a radical and total following of the Lord, a complete turning over of my life to Him. And fourthly, I preach it now, because oddly enough people listen to it and a lot of them will accept it, which I didn't know before. I didn't know that. People will do that. They'll respond. They'll open their lives to the Lord. They'll invite Him to take over, and He will deal with them in very direct and immediate and concrete ways.

And you know, when people do that, funny things happen to them. The Lord changes them. They don't change themselves. The press calls it, the media calls it 'getting religion'. The media doesn't understand it. They look for psychological factors to explain it. The factor that explains it is God. It's His action stirring up the Holy Spirit within the heart and the soul of the one who says 'yes' to the Lord. That's the way it works. It's God's work. But people change then. They become different. They stand out. They don't all know how to handle it. Some of them become pests, unfortunately. But their priorities change, their agendas get altered, their conversation is different then. They begin to talk about the Lord more. That's almost at some times the only thing they want to talk about: what He's doing, what they see Him doing, what they think He's saying. They change. They want to tell other people and they don't always do it very well.

I believe that we have to give ourselves every possible opportunity to move towards a more radical following of Jesus. And I believe that because the Lord has always intended it, but also because of the kind of world we live in. Without being pessimistic, the world we live in is collapsing around us. Structures and institutions are falling apart. We know that. I don't think casual following of Christ is going to make it anymore. That's what I'm saying. And I think we have to give ourselves every possible opportunity to move to a more radical following of Jesus.

A year ago, I heard a priest whom I admire very much, one of my heroes in the priesthood, I guess. Most of you would never have heard of him. His name is John Randall and he is pastor of

St. Charles Church in Providence, Rhode Island. I heard him tell a story to some of us about one of the things that he felt God had directed him to do in his parish, I think it was three years ago. He offered his parishioners a little wooden cross, something like the one I'm holding in my hand here, if you can see it. It's very small. It's much like the one the altar servers wear, except it's smaller. And he offered it to them on two conditions. Number one condition: that they *wear* it around their necks so that it could be seen. That's on the outside. Something like that, whether they're at home, or at work, or at school as the case may be, or out in society doing this or that. And secondly, that they would promise to *testify* to their relationship with Jesus and what that means in their lives when anybody would ask. That's all. Not to go around hitting people over the head with the cross, no. But to wait for anybody who would ask. Those were the conditions.

And he said there were a number of people of the parish who came forward and took the cross. And he said there was one woman who worked in a small textile factory, or mill, or whatever. I didn't quite get the details there. I didn't get into that. And she worked with a hundred other women. Now I don't know why there was only women working in that job. I didn't research that. That's not the point. But she worked with a hundred other women and she went to work the next day, Monday, wearing the cross. And she was laughed at. She was scorned. They heaped a fair bit of abuse on her. But she didn't say a word. She hung in there, and she went back day after day, and the abuse gradually died down.

About three weeks later, one of the other women during the coffee break one morning came over to her and said, "You know, you seem to have something going for you in your life that I don't have at all. In fact, my life is falling apart entirely." And she told her what was happening. "So just what is it that does that for you?" So, promise number two came into effect. She said, "Well, you've asked, I'll tell you. It's Jesus himself. He's real. He's alive. And He has touched my life as I turned it over to Him and He's changed it. And that's what gives me the peace that I have. I've never been as happy in my whole life. I know it was the best decision I've ever made."

And Fr. Randall told us that within a year and a half, every single one of the hundred people working in that plant had come to St. Charles Church and knelt at the altar railing and received the cross. And he said that little factory is a very, very different place today. When I heard that, I thought, "Hey, that sounds pretty good!" I'm not the kind of person to pick up on every idea I hear, but it sounded good and I said, "I'm going to pray to the Lord and ask Him if He wants us to do that." And I prayed, and I bounced it off a number of people and I prayed some more. I just felt God was saying, "Yeah, go for it." So that's what we're going to do too.

Next Sunday is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September the 14<sup>th</sup>. Instead of going down the aisle to the back as I always do after Mass, I will simply stay at the front. And if anybody would like to come forward and receive the cross and make those promises, make a commitment to Jesus, then we'll give them out. Come to think of it, we've only got 200. But I didn't assume that there would be any more than that to start. Now maybe some people are saying, "Well, I don't know if I'm ready for that." Well, that's fine. There's no pressure for this, okay? By the way, we're not going to wear them to church, all right? In the first place, we don't need to. In the second place, we don't want the congregation divided into those that wear it and those that don't. But we'll wear it other places.

Maybe some people will say, “Well, I don’t like the look of it. It’s not very ornamental.” I know it isn’t. That’s the point! People will not mistake this for an ornament. It doesn’t look very good! It’s pretty plain. Some people might say, “I don’t think it will do very much for me.” That’s right! In fact, it may do some things for you that you won’t like. That’s the thing. It won’t be mistaken for an ornament, you see. That’s the thing. Other people might say, “Well, that just seems a little extreme. That just seems a little off the wall. This guy, who does he think he is?” and so on. Well, there it is. I used to have a lot of common sense, now I’m off the wall. That’s it. That’s just the way it is. If you’re going to come here, you’re just going to have to put up with me. That’s all there is to it. You don’t have to take the cross, but it will be offered to us next week. Now, some people might say, “Well, I don’t think I’m ready. I’m not ready.” That’s fine, good, you’re not ready. So what we will do is the second Sunday of every month we will offer the cross as well. If you’re not ready this month, who knows, maybe next month you will. How about November? Would you like to try for December, before Christmas? How about that? January? New Year’s resolution? Who knows? Whatever. So that’s what we’ll do. So no pressure.

So that’s what I believe the Lord is calling from us. I believe He wants us to do everything we can to move ourselves to a more radical following of Him. And here’s the little prayer that will be in the bulletin next week that we’ll ask people to say if they want to take the cross:

“Jesus, I consecrate myself to You, body, mind and soul, and I wish to make you Saviour, Lord and King of my life in all things. I thank You for the opportunity to wear this cross as a symbol of my dedication to You and promise to witness to Your presence in my life whenever You may open the door. Please help me to be faithful to this pledge. Amen.”

That will be the little prayer that we’ll say, okay? Now who knows what the Lord will do through you. Who knows? People change when they turn things over to the Lord. They want to do things for Him. Some of them want to get out and serve the poor: get on the food line, the soup kitchen and do that. Great! That’s what it’s all about. Some of them want to go to the one that’s lonely and abandoned and desperate and on the bridge of suicide or something, and speak a word of hope. Tremendous! That’s what God does. He touches and He turns things around. He gives us new priorities. He makes His priorities ours, His burden, in other words, ours. “Come to me,” Jesus said, “with your burdens and lay them before Me. I will refresh you and I will give you *my* burden, which is touching every single human being that ever lived in this world.”

So, think it over, pray about it, and maybe next Sunday, or at subsequent times, some of us will become companions of the Cross.