

Reflection on the Word – Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
St. Joseph's Parish
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The question is stark. The question is deeply challenging. There's very little wiggle room, and there's no putting off the answer.

Today we are asked: "What must I do to follow Jesus?"

In these passages, Luke describes a man with unwavering determination, this Jesus on a mission, a guy who was resolute, who had a single-minded purpose. This is not the saccharine, lovey-dovey Jesus of pop culture – there's no diaphanous halo in sight. Jesus in today's readings comes across as "fierce" – which is not my usual vision of him on a sleepy Sunday morning.

Because Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem, the people did not receive him: he was too driven. Obviously, he had decided to climb up to Jerusalem, that city literally built on a hill. He had set his face to go up to the height of the cross. How do we stay close to Jesus on this road?

But here's the rub...today's message is not really meant for potential converts. It's for us, folks who show up to religious services almost every week, who think of ourselves as Christians, who try to live our family lives the right way, who care for our communities. The next 10 chapters of Luke's Gospel describe this journey to Jerusalem. But today, what hits us right between the eyes is that we, who try to (allegedly at least in my own case), follow Jesus, we are asked to look into our own hearts and minds at the implications of discipleship.

Yes. Today we must answer: "What must I do to follow Jesus?"

Maybe that's why I was baptized as an infant...after all, how many of us would willingly sign up if we were told we needed to follow a guy to torture and crucifixion?

Or as Dan Berrigan, the radical American Jesuit who recently died at age 94 once stated, "If you really want to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood."

So, do we?

You know, to admire Jesus, without trying to change our lives to more faithfully follow in his footsteps, seems like a real cop-out, like opting for cheap grace or “Gospel-lite.”

Our Church’s tradition has always understood that to follow Jesus means attempting to imitate Jesus...in his responses to problems, in his prayer life, in his grace-filled actions.

And, there is a cost to discipleship. Like Elisha, there’s no hanging back when we hear the invitation to service of the Lord. You need to keep your eye on the plough and not look back – or you’ll plough in crooked lines. Although I tell my kids that the most important Commandment is to “honour your father and your mother” – with special emphasis on that father part (for whatever good it does me...) the true disciple has his/her priorities straight and can be excused even from this most-important societal duty.

There might be a couple of ways to respond to the Gospel’s call:

Of course, like the Samaritans in today’s story, there is always the response of outright rejection. If the Way is seen as too demanding, why even start walking it?

Another option seems to be what could be described as “the hesitant shuffle.” The disciples in Luke’s account were already somewhat committed after all. But they were also totally ready to bring down fire on those who rejected their partial vision of Jesus’ mission. They made no attempt to look in the mirror at their own actions.

In North American consumer culture today, I think we Christians often respond to the Gospel message by domesticating it. We most conveniently follow the Christ of our own making. We gladly adopt a path of least resistance to Jerusalem, (perhaps preferably driven there in an air-conditioned vehicle?) We shape our faith to fit with the lives and values that we’ve already adopted, instead of the other way around.

What would our faith communities look like if we followed the pope’s injunction to take climate change seriously, and if our families adopted “green” responses so overwhelmingly that we Catholics really stood out as “counter-cultural”?

What would our care systems look like if followers of Jesus were so committed to building adequate, affordable and compassionate palliative care for those of our

neighbours who near the end of their life journey, that those resorting to assisted dying would be few and far between?

What would our churches look like if we were really following Christ the Liberator of the poor and oppressed, rather than the god of our dominant economic system? Would we agree with Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter *The Joy of the Gospel* (# 53-54), that “today we have to say “Thou shall not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality” ...because, again in the pope’s own words, “such an economy kills.”

What would our parish look like if we Catholic Christians understood the path to Jerusalem as walking towards policies that would welcome refugees and end poverty in Canada? Would there still be increases in the number of hungry guests arriving at the doors of St. Joe’s Supper Table?

Today’s readings caused me to question myself, in the words of that bumper sticker you may have seen: “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Today’s question keeps me uncomfortable, and keeps arising to my conscience: “What must I do to follow Jesus?”