

Sunday 13

“Tell me a story, tell me a story,” a child say to his mother or father at bedtime, and will not be content until the story has begun. The child may be asleep before the story has come to its end, but it must begin or he or she will not be content. But children are not the only ones who love a story. We all do. I suppose we do so because a story is about people, and we can identify with people. Secondly, it promises us mystery. We don’t now how it will end. Thirdly, it is always moving. If it stalls too long on one part or one part, it is in danger of losing us, the readers. We want movement.

But I suspect the deepest reason why we love a story is because that is what our own life is. Every life is a story. It begins and ends, and moves in between, and the end is not known even to us who are the ones living this story, this particular life. That was of course also true for our Lord himself. His life began and ended and moved in between, and even he did not know how it would end, although by the end of the story it became clearer and clearer how it would end, how it would have to end. And that is also true for ourselves. The older we get, the more we can predict what the end will be like.

But some of us live out our story, our lives, with a certain slowness about them. Like a country road, they twist and turn and we slow down to make the adjustments to the road's curves. But others among us live fast and straight. Our lives are like the traffic on a highway. It is direct and fast. The Lord's life seems to have encompassed both of these characteristics. Tradition tells us he died young, in his early thirties, and that most of his life was lived in a small town, and life moves slowly in a small town. But during the last year or two or, at the most, three years of his life everything changed. He was on the move, and he seemed to be in hurry, and everything pointed in one direction, Jerusalem. Perhaps the most apt way of describing this last part of life would be to compare it to a campaign. He wasn't running for election. But he did feel that he had a message which had to be delivered immediately and to as many of his own people as possible. He had to tell them that the Kingdom of God was breaking into their lives in a new and powerful way, and he was himself that new and powerful way.

Like anyone on a mission, he had to travel lightly, and when others wanted to join him on his journey, he demanded that they travel lightly as well. They had to sacrifice everything for the mission. That is what we see in today's gospel. Three people offer to join

him on his journey. The first one sounds very idealistic. “I will follow you wherever you go,” he says to Jesus, and Jesus answered him with a kind of warning: “You might end up homeless,” he warns him. The second person whom he invites to join his mission asks to be allowed first to bury his father. Jesus tells him to leave that to others and to come, now, to follow him. A third also begs time to say good-bye to his family. Again Jesus warns him that he must come now and forget his family.

These last two examples are, to say the least, extreme. What do they want to teach us? They want to teach us that following Jesus in his mission of preaching the Kingdom of God takes precedence over everything, absolutely everything in life, even the most sacred familial obligations.

In his Spiritual Exercises Saint Ignatius of Loyola makes the same point as the Lord in his Gospel. The purpose of these Exercises, Ignatius tells those making them, is to free them from anything which would keep them from doing the will of God in their lives. And he gives this example. Three couples have come into quite a bit of money and in a way that is not totally honest. All are uneasy in their consciences about this situation, but they respond to it in different ways. The first couple does nothing until the hour of their

deaths. So they die with the money but with an uneasy conscience. The second couple gives some of the money away but keeps most of it. The third couple prays over the matter to see what they should do with the money. They are willing to part with it if that is what God asks of them. The other two couples did not do that. They were too attached to the money. They lacked the freedom to give it away. They were like the two men in today's Gospels who put familial obligations before their journeying with the Lord. Ignatius also gives this other example of this third attitude, the one which puts God first in life. He says people should not decide first to get married and then ask how they can serve God as married people. No, the process should be reversed. They should devote themselves to God and then ask if they will serve God better as married or single people.

We must not underestimate what God will do with our lives if we give them over to Him as completely as we can, if we subordinate everything in them to our following of the Lord Jesus. Perhaps we will then begin to experience the kind of freedom which St. Paul talked about in his second reading for today from his letter to the Galatians. "Brothers and sisters," he says, for freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."