

8. November 2023

## Only the Lord

Lk 14:25-33

*Great multitudes accompanied Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*

Following the Lord is a loving response to His call. A bishop once said to me: "The best vocations are the ones that do somersaults." He was referring to those who allow themselves to be touched by the love of the Lord to the point of leaving everything behind to follow Him. These are the vocations we find among the Apostles, who left everything to follow Jesus (cf. Mt 4:18-22). We cannot see in them a long period of reflection or deliberation before making their choice.

Does this immediacy of decision contradict what Jesus tells us in today's Gospel through two examples in which He suggests careful reflection in order to follow Him?

The one does not detract from the other! We must become aware of what it means to follow Christ in its most concrete sense, but also in its broader sense. When I speak of the "more concrete sense", I am referring to religious vocations whose way of life corresponds to that of the Lord. The "broader sense", on the other hand, refers to all those who follow the Lord in other ways of life, for whom this word of the Lord is also valid.

On the path of following the Lord, which demands that we love with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength, there cannot be other things that occupy the same or even more space in our heart. That is why the Lord gives as an example the closest human relationships, which are family ties and even life itself. The call of the Lord

demands total surrender and a willingness to leave everything behind for His sake. This is first and foremost a matter of love.

In a way, this reality is reflected in true married love. For the sake of this love, other relationships are left behind, even the family home (cf. Gn 2:24), in order to live with this particular person. Apart from the love of God, which is above all else, nothing can compete with conjugal love. When other things appear that compete with this love, the expression of conjugal love is wounded. At the moment of sealing the marriage, the priest asks whether one is ready to love the husband or the wife. Those unwilling to do so, or who have fundamental objections, do not fulfil the conditions for a valid marriage. A good pre-marital preparation should clearly show the future spouses the full dimension of conjugal love, so that they know what marriage means in its self-giving character, and so that their decision is firm.

At this point we can return to the Word of the Lord, because the same is true of giving oneself to Him. This love cannot allow other things to be placed on the same level, because the Lord is a jealous God (cf. Ex 20:5). While the covenant sealed in marriage ends when one of the spouses dies, so that a new marriage can be formed, this is not the case in the relationship with God. The response to His love lasts for time and eternity, and this exclusivity is the very essence of love. Once we have chosen Him, we will love in God and from God, and thus our capacity to love is greatly expanded.

This is what we must keep in mind if we are to follow God's call wholeheartedly. Of course, He does not expect our hearts to be completely flooded with love and our human nature to be completely perfected right from the start! We will have a long way to go, but we want to do it with our free will and with our full consent, just as in marriage.

This commitment also implies a willingness to carry the cross. All this is linked to the relationship of love with Christ, including what we have to suffer for His sake, when we go against the current of the world, when our witness is not listened to and is even ridiculed... If we compare it again with marriage, we must take into account those words that are spoken when the marriage covenant is sealed: faithfulness is promised for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health, and so on. It is the same with the Lord: we cannot be with Him only on days filled with joy, but also in difficult times we are called to be faithful to Jesus.

If the Lord calls us, He will also give us the grace to walk this way. That is why we should not be frightened by the reality that the Lord places before our eyes when He mentions the conditions for following Him. We would certainly not be able to do it in our own

strength, for our capacity to love is very weak.

If we apply to our lives the example of the king who calculates the size of his army before confronting another, we can be sure that in our decision to follow the Lord we can count on His grace. And this is greater than the enemy armies that threaten us! Let us place our decision to follow Him in the Lord's hands, with all our will, and let us ask Him insistently that day by day we may grow in love and faithfulness. Then, together with the Lord, I will be able to face in battle the "other king", all that tries to turn me away from the great love, all that seeks to reduce my surrender to Him, all that wants to disturb my heart... In this way, having left behind all material and spiritual possessions, Jesus will be my only wealth.