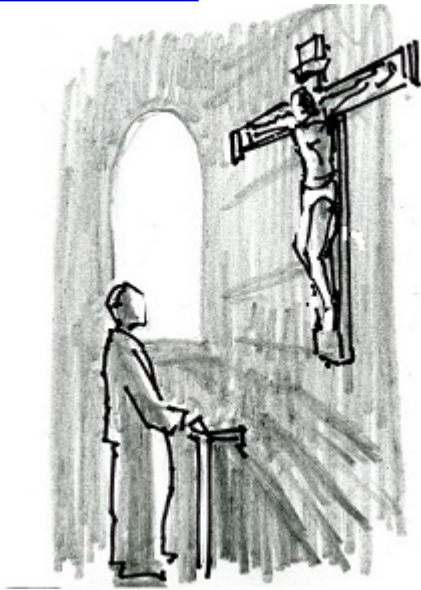


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‘Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:26).

A savvy politician will expand his message to broaden his appeal to more voters. Give them what they want to win the majority. As Jesus’ popularity increases, he seems to be doing the exact opposite. He sharpens his message to dissuade all but the most determined followers. Only those willing to “hate” their own families, to give up their own lives, can be his disciples.

While this may be Semitic hyperbole, the message is clear. The decision to follow Jesus is absolute. No half-hearted conviction will be enough to bring a disciple through the paradoxes and sacrifices they will face in order to finish the journey he is inviting them to make with him.

Two short parables illustrate the need to assess if you have the resources to finish the course before you begin. The tower builder is a laughingstock for starting to build before he has what he needs to complete his project. The king who picks a quarrel with a rival who has twice as many soldiers as he does will end up suing for peace before he is defeated.

Not just the crowds, but Jesus’ closest disciples do not seem to understand the radical nature of his mission or the total cost of it. They only see the glory of victory after their experience of Jesus’ powerful campaign of miracles and preaching and his rising popularity as they approach Jerusalem on the eve of Passover. His repeated predictions of suffering and rejection fall on deaf ears in the din of the welcoming crowds and swirling rumors of a messianic breakthrough.

A recurring image is at the heart of Jesus' demand for total commitment. The idea of carrying your own cross may foreshadow Jesus' crucifixion, but more likely, some scholars say, it referred to another expression using the Greek letter tau, or T, to mean that only those willing to shoulder the burden of their own lives and decisions would be able to complete the journey.

Being carried along by the crowd, or indulging a fantasy of personal heroism, or jumping in without considering the full consequences of such a life-decision will not be enough to survive the conversion experience of laying down one's life as Jesus was about to do.

The truth is that few of us grasp the radical nature of following Jesus. We are like the disciples who had to go through a series of baptisms before they realized the cost of imitating him, dying with him in order to rise with him. Like them, we can only continue to say "yes" to the small, daily invitations to die to ourselves for the sake of others, to listen for the voice of Jesus in our own circumstances to hear his instructions for us.

Our personal transformation in Christ and the fulfillment of our baptismal journey is not a program of self-improvement but a surrender to God's will as it is uniquely revealed to us one step at a time. Losing ourselves to find ourselves is more than a metaphor, and the dark interval of our crossing over will be unmistakable. God loves us so much that every false self we cling to will be taken from us to prepare us for the gift of God's image in us, our true self. We rejoice that God will accomplish this in each of us.

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