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Commitment to Jesus must be made every day

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

In today's Gospel, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem and he knows what is facing him there. But he is also attracting this large crowd of people who following him with great enthusiasm. Jesus determines that this is something critical. A decisive moment. It was for the people of that time, and because this word of God is a living word it must be a decisive moment for each one of us. Are we really ready to make the decision to follow Jesus?

To follow Jesus means to take up our cross and follow him. I am sure that most of all of us in some fashion have said yes that we are ready to follow Jesus. But have we made it a very decisive commitment no matter what the cost?

That is what Jesus is trying to challenge the people with, this idea that it is going to cost you something if you follow me. He uses those two parables to show us in a very simple way that we can easily understand. If we are going to build some big project, we had better sit down and figure out whether we have the resources to do it. If we have it, OK. If we don't, we decide not to go forward. Or again, a ruler, a king planning to go to war, he would sit down and try to figure out if I have enough soldiers and weapons to overcome my enemy. If I don't I had better find a different way to resolve my problems.

These are very simple comparisons, but they are meant to remind us that we should think about it before we blithely say "Oh, I'll follow Jesus." Because it will take costs. One of the reasons it can be very costly is that, as our first lesson pointed out today, "Indeed, what can we really know about the intentions of God? For human reason is ... our notions often mislead. We are barely able to know about the things of earth. Who then can hope to understand heavenly things, God's wisdom?"

In fact that idea about God's wisdom being different than our human calculations is brought out even

more clearly in a passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. I am sure you have heard this passage before, God is speaking to the prophet: "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways," says God. "For as high are the heavens above the earth are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." God's wisdom is something very profound and it sometimes doesn't see to make what we would call common sense.

God asks us to take a leap in faith to follow Jesus and that is precisely if we listen carefully to the second lesson today this recent convert, Philemon, a good friend of Paul, but someone very wealthy and, within the context of the times, he had slaves. He thought nothing of it, because that was the way things were. But suddenly, one of his slaves, Onesimus, has escaped, which means according to the Roman law of that time he should be executed. No one should give him protection. Well, he goes to Paul. Paul is in prison with some of the other disciples. And Onesimus listens to Paul, becomes a disciple of Jesus, is baptized and becomes a son of God. So what does Paul do? He sends him back, because he doesn't want to just have Onesimus get his freedom without Philemon being able to make that decision and give the slave his freedom. So suddenly Philemon is challenged. He has this slave -- and he probably has other slaves -- now Paul is saying that according to the teachings of Jesus, you cannot have another person as a slave.

In fact, Paul had put that very powerfully in a letter to the church in Galatia: "Once we are baptized into Jesus, there is no difference between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, rich or poor. We are all one in Christ. We are all equal as sons and daughters." Everyone. So you can't have a person as a slave.

So suddenly now Philemon is challenged. Paul leaves it up to him, do you want to follow Jesus or do you want to follow the laws of the Roman Empire and keep this person as a slave or treat him as a brother. So Philemon has to make the choice. It was very hard for him, I'm sure, for him to step outside of the usual practice, outside the culture that he was so familiar with and act according to the way of Jesus. In fact, that first part, when Jesus says that if you come to me without being ready to give up your love for your mother and father, your spouse, your children, brothers and sisters, you cannot be my disciple. That seems almost unbelievable. But Jesus says that you have to put being my disciple, if you decide, ahead of everything else, even your love for your father, your mother, your son and your daughter, your family. Do you think you could be ever challenged by that?

Well, I have some friends who live in Austria, the Jägerstätter family. Franz Jägerstätter a couple of years ago was proclaimed blessed by Pope Benedict, which means that he is declared to be in heaven among the witnesses, that multitude of witnesses, the saints. That happened a couple of years ago. I've known his widow, Franziska, for a number of years now, and their three children. The first time I met Franziska a number of years ago, I was amazed at her faith and her optimism, her joy, even though her husband had said no to Hitler and had been executed, beheaded on Aug. 9, 1943. He refused to serve in Hitler's army. She showed me her scrapbook. In the scrapbook she has a picture that she took one of the last times she went to Brandenburg Prison in Berlin to visit Franz. In the picture are their three small children; the oldest at the time was about six years old. They are holding a banner and on the banner were the simple words, "Father, come quickly."

They were begging their father to come back. Even if he had to serve in Hitler's army, they want him to come back, to come home. Can you imagine how that tore his heart when he looked at that picture? But later he wrote to Franziska and said, no I can't do it. I must follow the way of Jesus. I cannot serve in Hitler's army. I cannot fight for the ideology of Nazism. So he went to his death. That is an example of how you have to give up your father, your mother, your spouse, your brother, your sister. Sometimes it could be that demanding to follow Jesus.

Now most of us will probably never face a choice quite so stark, but there are other ways in which we

have to go against our culture, a culture of consumption where we are constantly encouraged to buy more and more, build up our wealth. Or to go against the culture of violence that seems to overwhelm our country at every level: violence in the home, violence in our streets, the violence of war. To follow Jesus we have to say no sometimes.

Are we willing to listen to this word of God, especially this proclaimed by Jesus and follow that rather than follow our own inclinations or our own so called human wisdom. Will we follow Jesus or follow the world around us, the culture in which we live that often goes against the values of Jesus. That is the decision that God is asking us make today. We, of course, made the decision when we were baptized, although most of us were baptized as infants, but perhaps at some time later in our lives -- when we were confirmed -- yes, we made that commitment, yes I will follow Jesus. But it is one we have to make every day. We have to constantly renew that commitment and be ready to follow Jesus no matter the price.

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So this morning as we celebrate this Eucharist, Jesus gives himself once more us, pours forth his body and blood on this altar for us out of love. Perhaps we should pray with great fervor that Jesus will give us God's wisdom and the strength to say yes wherever Jesus leads me I will follow.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Ann Parish, Frankfort, Mich.]

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