

Homily for September 9, 2001
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Wisdom 9:13-18a
Philemon 9-10, 12-17
Luke 14:25-33

We become empty of all that binds so we can be filled by God in Jesus Christ.

There's a fairly well known story about a conversation between a hen and a pig. They fell to speaking of the things they provide for human beings, and the subject of breakfast came up. "Now when it comes to the human breakfast," said the pig to the hen, "you only have to make a contribution. For me there is total commitment."

"If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own wife, he cannot be my disciple," says Jesus in Luke 14. For me those words have always been terribly unsettling. Throughout Christian history, these verses have been used to direct believers into religious life. They were not seen as applicable to the laity, who were thought to have a less demanding existence. But to interpret these lines that way removes their radicalness, for they are meant for everybody. To follow God in Jesus is to be free from all ties to the human family – but to follow God in Jesus is also to share with God the burden of carrying the whole human family. In other words, even the most radical following of Jesus Christ never lets us leave our human family but requires that we embrace it even more deeply. To be

free from all ties sounds initially as if I can be a rugged individualist, to follow my bliss, to do good as I determine it – but that's not it at all. To follow God in Jesus Christ is not to be preoccupied with my own self-development. It is rather to surrender myself completely and to go where I might not want to.

When I entered the seminary over forty years ago to see if I might someday be a priest, the motive out of which I entered was certainly not that for which I was ordained. I wanted to get an education, to better myself, and to do some good in the process. Only through the long process of formation did I realize that I really had to give up even that dream in order to be a true follower of Jesus. The formation process leading to ordination requires a person to center on Christ, whereby we become emptied of all that binds, even empty of our own self-love, in order to receive the strength to love self, others, and the world, through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The temptation is always to adapt the Gospel message like the disciples did who first followed Jesus. They were following him the old way. They wanted to profit from him, to get more things, a better position in the old order, to get rich, healthy, security that this world had never been able to offer. The temptation is always to assume that a radical challenge of Christian freedom means less than it says

– that one is surely not to abandon oneself wholly or totally. Unfortunately, to begin with a qualified gospel is to end with a qualified result that has little to do with the Gospel and a great deal to do with a desire for power. This Gospel cautions those who would adapt Jesus' hard sayings to their own purposes that the freedom proclaimed in Christ is never wholly of this world nor wholly of heaven.

On the cross, Jesus is suspended between heaven and earth – never wholly there nor wholly here but wholly in the hands of his Father – a total self-surrender of everything – family and self. Do we dare go there?

Gaze upon the crucified and let us pray: O good and gracious God, with fear and trembling we gaze upon our Lord and Savior who testifies through his death and resurrection that we can indeed trust our fate into your hands. Give us that courage to let go of everything that we may be your disciples, your sons and daughters through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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