

What did we say at the end of the Gospel? Praise to you, Lord Christ? Did you really mean that? Did you really listen to what the Gospel was saying? What we heard in the Gospel appointed for today is what I call some of the hard sayings of Jesus. It ended with Jesus saying “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” And then we all said, “Praise to you, Lord Christ!”

Where is the tender Christ who suffers little children to come to him? The comforting Christ who gives hope to the poor? The Christ who cares more for the one lost lamb than the 99 safe in the fold? Where is the Jesus who cries when he hears the news that his good friend Lazarus is dead? These are the images that come to mind when we think of our Lord and our relationship with him.

The Gospel this morning gives us a different picture of Jesus: a Jesus who is stern, demanding, expecting nothing but total commitment. He is the Christ who is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die, the Jesus who tells one would-be follower that there’s no security in being a disciple; who tells another would-be follower to leave his dead father behind; and still another that he must forget the past completely to follow him.

This is the Jesus we’d prefer to ignore, to forget about. We want the Jesus who comforts, who offers help in time of trouble, who has something to give to us. We don’t want to hear about the Jesus who demands total submission. Our consumer mentality tells us that you don’t get something for nothing, but let’s be reasonable! We can put in an hour in worship once a week or once in awhile; we can give a few dollars that are left over after we’ve paid for everything else needed to support our lifestyles; we might even consent to help out with Sunday School, or be in the choir, or serve on the Altar Guild, or even go to seminary and be ordained. Surely that ought to be enough to pay for the privilege of receiving what Christ and his Church have to offer us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls what I’m talking about cheap grace. “Cheap grace,” he says, “is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

The Gospel this morning suggests that Christ demands more—a lot more. It tells us that to be a disciple of Christ we must commit our entire being to him. To be with Christ, to receive the benefits he has to offer, we must give all that we are and all that we have to him. Discipleship means that Christ is our only security, that he must be the center of our lives. To follow Christ is to follow him stripped of all past securities, to Jerusalem, to the cross, for that is where self-emptying love will lead us.

That is the part of the Gospel we would rather not hear. Our lives are built around doing everything that we can to fulfill our desires, and America has made it possible to achieve what we really want in life—at least a minimum of what we want, since the more we have the more we want. And the cross is absent from the American dream. That dream includes comfortable housing; a good job; an adoring spouse; beautiful children, good food and plenty of it, hot baths, even tooth paste—but no cross.

There was a time when the chief message of the Church was self-denial—that at least ideally the Christian has a different set of values. Today the Church doesn't really look that different from any other part of society. Even the most conservative Christians have radically changed their message. Take a look at Christian T.V. and current Christian magazines. The message is very different and very clear: Come to Jesus for abundant worldly living, for success, and for substance, not for the cross and meaning. In fact, come to Jesus and he will bless you with worldly success.

Where is the cross? This does not sound even remotely connected to the Christ who said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has no where to lay his head." Jesus calls us to a life-style that is not self-serving, but which seeks the good and the well-being of the other. He continually calls us to stop focusing on ourselves, and to place our focus instead on loving God and our neighbor.

Soon it will be Independence Day. We take great pride in the freedom we enjoy in the United States, as indeed we should. But the freedom we enjoy is a political freedom, freedom from the tyranny of government. We should never try to fool ourselves that all individuals in our country are free. The person who spends all of his or her time doing only those things he or she enjoys is not free—that person is enslaved to the seeking of pleasure. The same can be said of the pursuit of wealth, or relationships, or fame. Each of us is susceptible to a particular kind of enslavement, even though we are politically free. The message of the Gospel is that true freedom comes only when we willfully submit ourselves to Christ. Only Christ can give us ultimately a sense of well-being and free us from our preoccupation with ourselves, and enable us then to live in service to God and his people.

I am not suggesting that each of us must sell all we have and become missionaries in Africa. Jesus expects that whatever we have chosen to do with our lives be done in the context of our relationship with him. If you're a teacher, then teach out of your Christian conviction; likewise, if you're a biologist, or a janitor, or an accountant, or an actor—do what you do as an offering to God. If you're retired, perhaps God is calling you to some kind of ministry. Whatever your circumstances, Jesus expects to accomplish his purposes through you, and he will only do that if you submit yourself totally to him. Ironically, when we do that, we're freed from everything else that would enslave us.

This is what Bonhoeffer calls costly grace. "Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ."

The Gospel today is a radical call to commitment. Jesus is calling us to follow. How will you and I respond?