

## 22nd Sunday A (Matt 16:21-27)

In today's Gospel, Jesus issued an incredible invitation. "If a person wishes to come after me, that person must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps." What is even more incredible is that some people actually accepted that invitation. They gave up their jobs, their businesses, their personal plans and ambitions in order to walk with him. Why would they do that? Why have many others across the centuries done that? There was no coercion involved. No one held a spear to their backs or a gun to their heads. They weren't pushed from behind; they were drawn from within. The plain truth is that they were charmed by Jesus. There was something about him that made them willing to deny themselves, take up a cross, and follow in his footsteps.

We here today still feel the spell of his charm. Across the years and across the miles, we choose to think of ourselves as his followers. Admittedly, most of us, most of the time don't follow him very closely. I guess our question today is this: Why do we even bother to try? Why do people follow Christ at all? Perhaps the reason is the same for us as it was for his first followers- we have fallen under the spell of his charm. And that spell of his charm is threefold.

First is the quality of his life. We tend to look at Jesus through theological bifocals. We are aware of his humanity, but mostly we think of him as divine. His original followers initially saw Jesus as a man, a most amazing man, more alive than anyone they had ever known. His way of living was so superior to their way of living that they wanted to know his secret. He continues to wield that same influence to this very day. Part of the reason that you and I are here today is because we are fascinated by the life of Jesus. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of Jesus as he really was, and we become fascinated by the way he lived. He had none of the things we may associate with the good life. No house, no car, no TV or computer, and very little money- and yet he has held eighty generations under the spell of his magnificent life.

Another reason people have responded and still respond to that incredible invitation is the authority of his truth. A typical response to his teaching was sheer amazement. People had listened to teachers before, all sorts of teachers, but never one like this. They were amazed by him, not because he was eloquent or clever, but because he understood life so clearly and made such good sense when he talked about it. That has happened many times since. In some measure, it has happened to everyone of us here. We may not follow perfectly the truth he taught, but we have a hard time disagreeing with it. We may sometimes call it impractical or even impossible, but we are still fascinated by it and are drawn to it. People followed him in the beginning, have followed him across the years, and continue to follow him today because of the authority of his truth, he who is way, truth and life.

The third reason people accepted his incredible invitation was the warmth of his love. The over-riding impression which he made on men and women alike was that he cared for them. The impression of a caring Christ prevailed across the centuries. We have celebrated it in art, in literature, and in music. Part of the reason you and I are in this place this morning is that we believe he loves us too. And even when we doubt it, we still want to believe that it's true. He would not leave us orphans, he tells us. Remember me when you celebrate my love for you in the Eucharist. We continue to be drawn to him by three golden cords- the quality of his life; the authority of his truth, and the warmth of his love. And we give thanks as we remember him today.

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