

23rd Sunday (C)

4th September 2022

'The cost of discipleship ... and of priesthood'

Wis 9: *as for your intention, who could have learnt it, had you not ... sent your*

Holy Spirit?

Lk 14:25–33: the unfinished tower ... the king marching to war ...

What exactly does Jesus mean by those two little parables? (the unfinished tower; and the king pulling out of a battle knowing he's outnumbered?) I hear those parables as reminders that we can't 'go it alone' — we can't manage our lives without God. If we try and build up our lives by our own devices we just end up like that unfinished tower, going nowhere; likewise if we try and set our human hearts proudly warring against the Christ the king who made our hearts for Him, then we end up defeated, desolate and empty. Jesus says to us: *you can't go it alone!* But you don't need to go it alone! God is with you — "in Me," says Christ, "God is amongst you, in My Church."

The challenge of being the Church, and the challenge of being a priest, is all about the cost of discipleship, isn't it? Do I wish to make the sacrifices, to give up time and perhaps money, and to amend my behaviour, in order to be a fervent disciple of Christ, or even a *priest* of Jesus

Christ? Is that a price I wish to pay? ... Or am I willing to settle for second best? — like the man giving up on building the tower, or the king giving up on defending himself against the advancing king? Many are willing to settle for second-best, for a life without the Lord. But we are not to be like that — we are to strive for the best, to make sacrifices, to build up the Church (not leave it unbuilt), to win the war against evil (not to despair at the attack of the devil): to be, that is, the fervent disciples of Christ, despite the cost ... And to be His priests.

Today is in fact the 23rd anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. It is lovely to celebrate it here with you and to be your chaplain, at the start of my 2nd year at Newman House. So I want to talk a bit more specifically about the cost of the priesthood.

I remember some time back, a colleague who worked with me in the Royal London Hospital brought her sons to Mass at the hospital chapel. A few days later she sent me an e-mail saying how, ever since then, her elder boy, then about 9, had been saying how nice I was, and how I spoke

slowly and must mean what I said, and how he had taken to play-acting being a priest, complete with the singing. She ended her e-mail, “What have you done to him?” I told her that I hadn’t done anything, and that if anyone had done anything, God had! I asked her how she felt about it, if God indeed had planted in his heart a desire to be a priest. And she said, “Well, he belongs to God, and God can do with him what He would wish — he doesn’t belong to me.” But she also added a concern, “Priesthood is the hardest and riskiest vocation a man can have.” I was surprised that she’d put it like that, emphasizing the hardships of the priestly life, because ultimately I don’t really see it that way at all.

Yes, of course there are sacrifices to be made in following God’s calling as a priest: giving up the roles of husband and father to children, of a home of one’s own, of many possessions, of much time to call one’s own. True, these are costs, but they are not impossible costs. And the benefits of a priestly life are huge: the deep joy of bringing Christ to people and people to Christ; of reconciling people

to God with their sins forgiven; of celebrating the Mass which makes Christ’s supreme sacrifice on the Cross readily available to us; of being there for people in their deepest need, their need for God to satisfy their spirit.

But the cost of being a priest is just a special example of the costs of being a Christian at all. Yes, the priesthood brings with it certain key challenges: of poverty (as opposed to any degree of luxury); of chastity, lived out in a celibate life; of obedience to one’s bishop or superior. But any and every Catholic who is truly living the Christian life day-in, day-out has challenges: to be a Catholic wife and mother; to be a Catholic husband and father; to be a chaste young Catholic adult, especially amidst today’s pressures; to be a faithful Catholic when so many other entertainments, distractions and false hopes crowd around. These are all costs of anyone’s Christian discipleship. If a local community and the families of the Church are already living the Gospel in its fullness: giving all for Christ — not settling for compromise in faith or prayer or morals — then there will be priests. It is where

there is already sacrifice being made for God — where families are practising and parishes (& chaplaincies!) are making every effort for God and neighbour ... where the cost of discipleship is *already being paid* — that in such a climate there will also be priests, because the extra costs of following the Lord in a specially close conformity to His Mind and Will as a priest are seen as so worthwhile as to be welcomed. In such an atmosphere the challenge of being a priest for God's people is in fact a really attractive one: a life lived with the greatest possible purpose, that of serving you, His people, God's beloved sons and daughters.

I'd like to connect this, briefly, with someone important here in London this weekend: St Bernadette Soubirous, whose relics have recently arrived in London to begin a 2-month tour around the dioceses, cathedrals and parishes of England, Scotland & Wales. Her visit began yesterday with Mass in a jam-packed Westminster Cathedral. St Bernadette of Lourdes received 18 apparitions of Our Lady in quick succession, mostly

concentrated in a fortnight February–March 1858, and from those apparitions, judged by the Church very quickly to be absolutely genuine, come the numerous pilgrimages that are made by millions every year to that small town in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Of all the messages and instructions that Our Blessed Mother entrusted to St Bernadette, there is one that I am always struck by particularly, and causes me to reflect. It was said to Bernadette at the 3rd apparition, 18th February 1858, the first time that Our Lady uttered any words there in Lourdes. Of the few words that the Blessed Mother said to 14-yr-old Bernadette, she said, "*I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the next.*"

What realism, expressed there by Our Lady to Bernadette, chosen to be a saint by the Lord God. "*I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the next.*" In other words, there will be *costs* associated with discipleship. And it's good for us to realise so. We might not be as young as Bernadette — she was 14 when Our Lady said that to her — but it's good as young adults, as

students, to hear those words, and to take them to heart, as St Bernadette did, as a motto that will set the course for life. Our guide for life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, asks us to set a course for heaven, not to set our course for maximizing what we might think is happiness here on earth. There's nothing wrong with a happy life, but it's got to be that *deep* happiness, accompanied almost certainly by sacrifices, that comes with putting the Gospel first.

I urge you if you can do so in the next 24 hrs, to visit and pray at the cathedral, where St Bernadette's relics are currently enshrined — it's open 24hrs, night and day — and as you do so to meditate on those words of Our Lady, summing up the Gospel, encapsulating *today's* Gospel, "*I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the next.*" Let St Bernadette, and the holy Mother of Jesus, help you to seek true happiness, to accept the costs and sacrifices of discipleship, to want to be saints even already as young adults, and to give your life to Christ, loving the things of Jesus above all things, ... and, for some of you, to be His priests.