

Homily 4th September 2022 23rd Sunday of the Year

I was talking to a lady a few weeks ago and she was telling me a story about a confrontational situation at her work. At a certain point I got distracted by a certain phrase she kept throwing out. It went something like this: “I turned round and I said to her...”; “and she turned round and said to me...”. Why all the turning around, I asked myself? It was actually quite funny to visualize these two ladies turning round and round as they argued with each other.

I think this idea of “turning round and saying something” – as opposed to just saying it – is supposed to emphasize the element of confrontation or challenge in a situation. If we’re just walking along and then I turn round and say something to you, it changes the dynamic quite abruptly. Suddenly, we’re not faced in the same direction any more. We’re not in agreement; we’re in opposition.

Let’s turn to today’s Gospel reading. It begins like this. “Great crowds accompanied Jesus on his way and he turned and spoke to them.” Jesus didn’t just say something; he turned and said something, and by doing so changed the interpersonal dynamic. He deliberately moved out of a situation of friendly accompaniment and into one of direct confrontation. And what he said to the crowd raised the stakes even further. “If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple.” It’s almost like Jesus is deliberately trying to turn people away. And in a way, he is.

This calls for a bit of context and explanation. We have to remember where Jesus is going at this particular moment. He is on his way to Jerusalem. And he knows what’s going to happen there. He’d already spelled it out to his disciples: “The Son of Man is going to be handed over into the power of men. They will crucify him.” Jesus knew what was coming and he knew it wasn’t pleasant. But as for the crowds who accompanied him, they didn’t have a clue.

This is why Jesus turns round and throws that zinger in their faces. It’s as if he was saying “Look, I know where I’m going. But do you know where you’re going? Do you know where this journey leads? And are you really prepared to make it with me?” The rhetoric about hating mother and father and children and your own life comes back to the basic reality of Christian discipleship. If you haven’t made the necessary interior renunciations, you simply won’t have the resources for this journey; you won’t be able to accompany me all the way to Calvary. And of course, events proved Jesus right. Those crowds did not accompany him to Calvary. Instead, they clamoured for his death. The few who didn’t turned tail and ran.

What does Jesus say to us today, then? Or rather, what does he *turn round* and say to us, as we follow him on the way? So often, especially in our relatively comfortable part of the world, we can be like those crowds, scandalised by even the mention of sacrifice. “Oh wait – you mean this discipleship thing is actually going to *cost* me something? I can’t just follow along?” That’s right. We can’t just “follow along”. If that’s all our Christian commitment really amounts to – a casual tagging along with Jesus – then how can we ever expect to stand firm in the moment of trial? Jesus doesn’t need bigger crowds, more followers, more buzz. That wasn’t what he wanted in his own day, and it’s not what he wants today. What he wants is true disciples. People who have made the necessary interior renunciations. People ready to follow him, not just part of the way, but all the way to Calvary.