

# To Accept Christ Is to Accept His Cross

## Biblical Reflection for 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, AUG. 31, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Today's Gospel passage (Luke 14:25-33) contains a collection of sayings that are peculiar to Luke. Luke has Jesus speak about the demands of discipleship. He gathers three sayings (26-27, 33) and two parables (28-32).

They focus on the total dedication necessary for disciples of Jesus. No attachment to family (26) or possessions (33) can stand in the way of the total commitment demanded of the disciple. Acceptance of the call to be a disciple demands readiness to accept persecution and suffering (27) and a realistic assessment of the hardships and costs (28-32).

The two parables embedded in today's Gospel passage say in their own way what Jesus is saying in the preceding verses: Are you sure you wish to follow me? Is the price more than you are willing to pay? The first parable involves building a tower in a vineyard from which the farmer can stand watch against thieves and foraging animals. The second pictures the royal house where great political issues are settled. But rich and poor, royalty and peasants, have essentially the same decision to make when faced with a major expenditure of time, property, and life itself: Is this cost more than I am able or willing to pay? The decision is no different when one is facing the call to discipleship: The enthusiasm for beginning is there, but do I possess the resources to persevere to completion?

Both parables highlight the need to use wisdom in assessing the cost of discipleship. Both the tower builder and the warring king must calculate the costs and study the risks before making a final decision. The disciple must know that following Christ requires an allegiance that will always be the highest priority. To accept the person of Christ is to accept his cross as well.

The source of our happiness

The author of today's first reading from the book of Wisdom (9:13-18) is not dealing with the age-old distinction between what is of the body and what is of the soul (known often as dualism). The view of human nature in the Hebrew Scriptures is not dualistic, even though it is clearly recognized that the limitations of human nature make it impossible for us to fully comprehend the mysteries of God.

As Christians we need not oppose human progress nor reject comforts and pleasures. The believer must assess these within the delicate balance of wisdom and life. Today's first reading challenges us: Does our happiness come from the mere acquisition of possessions or from sharing and interacting with God and neighbor?

Choosing Christ above all else

In the midst of the many voices clamoring for our time, money, allegiance and attention, we are called to

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choose Christ to the complete dispossession of all else. This is a great challenge for each of us, especially in our day. We so often define choice not as the freedom to choose one action over another, but as the freedom to choose everything at once. Freedom of choice has come to mean keeping our options open. The tragedy of this condition is that it is literally impossible to "keep our options open" and live lives of any significance.

I have found this to be one of the most difficult aspects of my teaching and pastoral ministry with many young people over the past 20 years: their unwillingness to commit to anything, to take risks, or to follow through on commitments already made. The obvious problem is that it is impossible to make any choice without consequences that rule out other options. Every choice we make automatically excludes other choices. This choosing is essential and even desirable for a meaningful life.

### One mission or 1,000 options

One of the clearest teachings of this point was made by Australian Cardinal George Pell during his outstanding homily at the Opening Mass for World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney, on July 15, 2008.

Cardinal Pell spoke to the throng of over 150,000 young people from throughout the world about their mission in life: "Don't spend your life sitting on the fence, keeping your options open, because only commitments bring fulfillment. Happiness comes from meeting our obligations, doing our duty, especially in small matters and regularly, so we can rise to meet the harder challenges. Many have found their life's calling at World Youth Days."

Cardinal Pell's stirring words still ring in my ears two years later: "One mission is better than a thousand options."

### True wisdom and freedom

In the midst of our chaotic lives Jesus stops and says, "You have to choose." In his call to authentic discipleship, Christ challenges our most precious loyalties. As there can be no other gods before the God of Israel, there can be no other loves before Christ. Thus, there is a cost to following Jesus, and the curious and half-hearted should take notice. Discipleship may cost us everything, but will gain for us all that will ever matter. Only then will we be truly wise and truly free.

### The claim of Christ and the Gospel

Luke emphasizes that Jesus does not like compromises and requires a commitment of the whole person, a decisive detachment from any nostalgia for the past, from family demands, from material possessions (cf. Luke 9:57-62; 14:26-33). To the call to cross bearing, already issued in 9:23, is joined the almost frightening demand to hate one's family and one's own life (26).

To hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from someone or something. There is nothing of that emotion we experience in the expression "I hate you." Were that the case, then Verse 26 alone would cancel all the calls to love, to care, to nourish, especially one's own family found throughout the New Testament.

And to hate one's own life is not a call for self-loathing and self-destruction. What is demanded of disciples, however, is that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ and the Gospel not only takes precedence but also, in fact, redefines the others. This can and will necessarily involve some detaching, some turning away.

To be a Christian for Luke means to follow Jesus on the path that he takes (9:57; 10:38; 13:22; 14:25). It is

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Jesus himself who takes the initiative and calls us to follow him, and he does it decisively, unmistakably, thus showing his extraordinary identity, his mystery of being the Son who knows the Father and reveals him (10:22). Jesus speaks to all those who walked with him at that moment in history, and to those of us who walk with him today: "Think about what you are doing and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way."

Human beings will always be tempted to lessen the radical demands of the Gospel and to adapt them to our own weaknesses, or to give up the path undertaken. But the authenticity and quality of the Christian community's life depends precisely on this. A Church that lives by compromise would be like salt that has lost its taste (14:34-35).

### A compassionate portrayal of the disciples

To be called does not require perfection on our behalf, only fidelity and holy listening. Samuel and the prophets of Israel, Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany, the fishermen of Galilee and even the tax collectors that Jesus called were certainly not called because of their qualifications or achievements. Paul says that Jesus calls "the foolish," so that the wise will be shamed. The Gospel portrayal of the disciples is compassionate because it makes a place for people who struggle to reach their dreams, for people who at times forget their call to greatness. We will never be the same because Jesus has called us, loved us, changed us and made us into his image. Because he has called us, we have no choice but to call others to accept the Gospel and follow him.

### Cardinal Newman's cost of discipleship

On Sept. 19, 2010, in Birmingham, England, the long awaited beatification ceremony will take place for the great Victorian Catholic theologian, John Henry Cardinal Newman, one of the most influential English Catholics of the 19th century. He journeyed from Anglicanism to Catholicism and used his great intellect and masterful writing ability to win over thousands of people to Christ and the Roman Catholic Church.

In becoming Catholic, Newman had to make many sacrifices. Many of his friends broke off relations with him after his conversion, and his family kept him at a distance. He had to resign his teaching fellowship and lost his only source of income. He lived the terrible pain of misunderstanding from his own family, from Church leaders, and those closest to him. Newman said that the one thing that sustained him during this trying period was Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

As a tribute to his extraordinary work and devotion, Pope Leo XIII named Father John Henry Newman a Cardinal in 1879. After a life of trials, Newman received the news with joy and declared, "The cloud is lifted forever."

Cardinal Newman died at the age of 89 at the Oratory House in Edgbaston on Aug. 11, 1890. He was declared Venerable in 1991 by Pope John Paul II. On Sept. 19, 2010, Benedict XVI, himself, will honor Cardinal John Henry Newman, a good and faithful servant who paid the price for the cost of discipleship of Jesus.

[The readings for 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time are Wisdom 9:13-18b; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: [rosica@saltandlighttv.org](mailto:rosica@saltandlighttv.org).

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