

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

Choices cause conflict; in us and in those we love.

To chose one thing is to chose against others. We have learnt this since childhood: to chose a best friend means that other friends are not considered best. To chose a partner means the not-choice of other partners. To chose a path, a career, a priority, a place to live, a pathway out of danger, a change — all of these changes introduce conflict: conflict within ourselves; conflict with those around us; conflict with those who struggle to understand or accommodate our choices.

It seems that Jesus of Nazareth was a man who took choices seriously. His was an inner integrity that must have been hard to be around. In the face of danger, he followed the thing that compelled him, despite the threats to his own person and body and safety. In the face of accusations, he continued on speaking, despite the implications for his family's reputation. In the face of authority, he spoke of a deeper authority, knowing that the authority in front of him could outdo him.

He must have been difficult to love.

And this is what he speaks of in this week's gospel.

Text

Luke 14:25–33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid

a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Comment

If the writer of the gospel of Luke had thought to render the text in the same way that other gospels did:

“Whoever comes to me and wants to be my disciple must prefer me over father and other, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself?” we would have an easier time with this text.

After all, many things call for priorities. “My Utmost for His Highest” was a daily devotional text that many of my friends read when I was younger.

However, it’s that tricky word “hate” in there that makes this text arresting, offensive even.

It’s true that the Semitic literatures sometimes used strong language like this for the purpose of comparison. If “hate” then “love”. So by posing a broad gulf that should prioritise your priorities, Jesus is facing his followers with a choice. Perhaps it’s like the phrase “cutting off your nose to spite your face”. To take that literally is to miss the point — it’s about not knowing your end goal, rather than maiming your self.

But still, it jars.

I often wonder how Jesus’ family heard such statements.

And I wonder how the family members of the followers of Jesus heard those statements too. Did they hear them in a metaphorical way, or were they conflicted by the conflicts being evoked in this strange new language.

Perhaps it’s worthwhile to say that Jesus was suspicious of celebrity. And sometimes when he was about to get adulation, he escaped (remember the feeding on the mountain in John’s Gospel? they want to make him King; he moves away). So here, it’s easy to skip over the “large crowds” that are following him. Perhaps Jesus didn’t like large crowds, and it seems likely that he distrusted the kinds of group mentality associated with fads and fame.

“Why are you following me?” could be a question at the heart of that text.

Why indeed.

Years ago, I was praying the Stations of the Cross. I was praying the Stations of the Cross because I always prayed the Stations of the Cross. I did them practically every day for about 10 years.

Walking around a Catholic Church, observing the 14 depictions from the time that Jesus was condemned to death to the time his chilling corpse was laid in the tomb, I found sustenance, honour, narrative and containment in the practice. However, one day, around the third station (Jesus Falls the First Time) a question occurred to me:

Why are you doing this?

This did not feel like a fearful question, or a question that was of the ordinary experience of oscillating between doubt and not-doubt. This was a question posed without malice, but with penetrating intent.

Why are you doing this?

I didn't finish the Stations. I sat down, unnerved by the question, because I think I'd forgotten.

It felt like a question from God, the ultimate question. I didn't know what to do with this kind of blunt curiosity. He stopped me — literally. Why was I praying? Why was I doing the Stations of the Cross every day? Was I frightened of who I'd be if this wasn't something I did? It was an invitation into some kind of unknowing; some kind of chaos; some kind of void.

I can't help thinking that Jesus was partly speaking to himself in the text we have for this Sunday. The gospel of Luke is centred around two serious questions: Is this man a prophet like was told of old? And, what's going to happen when he gets to Jerusalem?

He is getting the recognition from the large crowds. Certainly people seem to think he is some kind of a prophet. For ten long chapters, though — from chapter 9 to chapter 19 — Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, a place he knows conflict awaits him. And during that long chapter his mood gets heavier. He begins speaking complicated words. He must have felt the tug of love — towards family, towards friends, towards what he knew would await him if he toned down his critique of empire and high power. Maybe he was speaking to himself, reminding himself that he had to love something more in order to be faithful to the mystery of the integrity that drew him deeper and deeper.

The gospel text this week calls us to a place of inner conflict. It is not a harsh voice that calls us, it is — strangely — a reassured voice. Even if we are afraid of the reasons we do things, God isn't. Our anxiety is not God's anxiety. God is in the hate and the love. And following a path of integrity seems to call us deeper.

Ignatius of Loyola speaks about “disordered attachment” and about “active detachment”.

In his way of seeing things, attachment was our connection to the things of our lives: good things, complicated things, important things, necessary things.

However, even with good things, he saw that the attachment needed spiritual attention. Even an important thing can have a dangerous appeal to our attention. So he urged his followers to cultivate what he called *active detachment*.

Active detachment, in his understanding, was a way of knowing the priority of important things in comparison with the most important thing, so that nothing gets in the way of the most important thing.

All of that begs the question: what’s the most important thing? Ignatius called that the Principle and Foundation.

It’s up to you, is the true and annoying answer. Each person is called to their own deepest integrity. There is no one size fits all. Finding the the most important thing is not an invitation to be callous with everything else, but it is an invitation to deepen the connection with everything in a way that makes way for the most important thing to be the most important thing.

Prayer

Difficult Jesus
You faced yourself
when you faced us
and, having faced yourself,
you knew how difficult it could be.
Help us to face ourselves,
with all our competing desires,
so that we can follow the deepest way of love
and there,
find you,
who finds us.
Amen.