

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Sept. 5, 2004)**

Does He Really Mean That?

Sometimes Jesus says the most startling things. When you hear them you want to stop and say, “Does he really mean that?” You know, that business about loving your enemies, doing good to those who hurt you, or turning the other cheek if someone slaps you on one cheek? Or even worse: “If your right eye scandalizes you, pluck it out. If your right hand scandalizes you, cut it off.” And in today’s Gospel passage, “Unless you hate your father, mother, brothers, and sisters, and even your own life, you can’t be my disciple.”

I can just imagine those who were following him looking at one another in amazement, especially Peter and the others who were so close to him, and saying to themselves, “Where is he coming from? What’s it all about, and does he really mean it?”

Well, he is coming from the Father and it’s all about the Kingdom of God and yes, he does really mean it. The question is: what is it that he really means?

Love your enemies? Well, your enemies are human beings, too, so treat them that way. As much as it may go against the grain. Maybe you’ll find that they cease to be enemies and become friends. Turn the other cheek? Don’t return violence for violence. The only thing that does is create more violence. Don’t we have plenty of examples of that throughout history and especially in our world today? Is Jesus saying we should just passively accept whatever harm or injustice someone or even society commits against us? No, not at all. What he *is* urging is that we do our best to be creative and find some non-violent way to deal with unjust situations.

So, what about our Gospel? Hating father, mother, brothers, and sisters? Well, by this time it should be clear that Jesus uses hyperbole and concrete language, first of all to catch our attention and then to say in concrete language what we would put in more abstract terms: there is nothing in this world that is more important than responding to the call to follow Jesus. And be aware that he is not just talking to the apostles or

those who might have a special vocation. Luke tells us that great crowds were following him. So not only does he really mean it, he means it for everybody. Everybody is called to be a disciple. And Jesus pulls no punches in letting us know that accepting to be a disciple, accepting to follow him means letting nothing stand in the way. It also means a willingness to suffer with him and to be quite clear about what the cost will be.

It seems pretty clear that what Jesus is trying to do with these very startling statements is produce change: change in the way people think; then change in the way people act; and finally change in the way the world works. When you put this passage together with the one we heard last week about taking the lower place at a banquet and inviting to our own parties not those who can repay us but the poor, the weak, the lame, those who cannot afford to return the favor, we find a Jesus who is trying to create a new world order, a really new world order. One that is based, as we saw last week, on humility, and the courage to turn accepted social structures upside down, and complete devotion to the person and cause of Jesus.

So Jesus was looking for a change. But so were those great crowds that were traveling with him. They wanted a change, too. There were the hungry who wanted to be fed; the sick who wanted to be healed; the poor who wanted to be rich; the zealots and revolutionaries who wanted to be rid of the Roman occupiers and to establish a new kingdom of Israel.

But Jesus was thinking of something different. Oh, he was thinking of a kingdom all right, the kingdom of God, and he was asking for a radical response.

Paul gives us a good example of that kind of radical response. He has given up everything to answer the call of Christ. In our second reading today he is writing from prison where he is suffering for the sake of the Gospel. But he writes this letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who has been a fellow prisoner with Paul. Paul speaks to Philemon about receiving the slave, Onesimus, as a brother in the Lord. It's a good illustration of how this new Kingdom, this new family of God, crosses lines of status and power, making all members brothers and sisters in Christ, children of the same God.

When Jesus speaks about family ties and possessions in the Gospel

passage, he is primarily asking for a change in mindset. All of us can begin to think differently. And then we can begin to act differently. We can be less consumerist, more simple in our tastes. We can begin to find room for others. We can find more time to serve the less fortunate. The doors of our homes and of our hearts begin to be more open. Prayer becomes more real in our lives. It may mean less television and more conversation. It may mean less money for recreation and more for God's poor. Like Paul we begin to see, perhaps not slaves these days, but at least other races, colors, nationalities, Afghans, Iraqis, Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, we begin to see them as our brothers and sisters. And with a certain amount of courage we may ask others to do the same. This is how we work with God's grace to establish the Kingdom here on earth. Jesus is asking each and every one of us to work with him, to struggle with him in the work that he has begun but that he left it to us to finish. It's a noble enterprise, a noble vocation, one that is given to all of us if we want to follow Christ, to *really* follow Christ.