23rd Sunday

Are you shocked by the Gospel that you just heard? Jesus' speaking of "hating one's father, mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters" is very shocking. Isn't one of the commandments "honor your father and your mother"? Doesn't Jesus teach love of enemies? Why would he say "hate"? And in this world in which we live when there is so much hate, do we really need to hear Jesus telling us that we must "hate" our families?

I was tempted to take the "easy way out" and use the Matthean version of this text. Matthew says "He who loves father or mother "more than me" is not worthy of me". That's easier to hear than "hate". Of course, we do not know the words that Jesus used to describe the cost of discipleship but Luke uses the word "hate" to shock his listeners who may think that following Jesus as his disciple provides an "easy way out". The word "hate" on the lips of Jesus who is all about love and forgiveness certainly makes us stop and think! And if that's not hard enough to understand. Listen to the last line. "Anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions can not be my disciple". (I was tempted to add "except your cell phone". The other day I went to an appointment down town and forgot my iphone and was in a panic without it!)

So what' this all about? Is Jesus really telling us that we have to hate family and renounce what we own to follow him?
No, I don't think so but this text certainly challenges our priorities. To follow Jesus, costs. It means making decisions that are not the "easy way out" but demand real sacrifice. (Easier said than done!) Another way of putting it: Jesus is asking us "do we have what it takes to follow him? Isn't this really about "freedom" to follow Jesus?

In his homily this morning , Fr Jim Miracky put a different spin on "renouncing all your possessions", asking us to think about what "possesses" us. What owns us? In our relationships with people or material things, do we really have personal freedom? I know I can make a list of "things" that I would have a very hard time letting go of!

Someone who never took the "easy way out", who had "what it takes" is Mother Teresa of Calcutta who is being canonized this weekend. We've all heard the stories of her absolute dedication to the poor, the outcast on the streets of Calcutta. Her community, the Missionaries of Charity continue her ministry of presence, of healing, of serving the poorest of the poor, living in utter simplicity with no "possessions". Father James Martin in his *My Life with the Saints* beautifully describes this woman's journey into the heart of God and God's solidarity with the suffering of human kind. He quotes her saying

It is very fashionable to speak about the poor. Unfortunately is it very unfashionable to speak with them

Mother Teresa more than walked the walk. She carried not only her personal cross but the crosses of the countless men, women and children that she washed, anointed, caressed, cared for while they were dying. How did this one woman find the interior courage to be so completely dedicated to others, with so little regard for herself? Perhaps she gives us some hint of that in her own words

God does not demand that I be successful. God demands that I be faithful.

And she was both! Even when we hear of her "dark night of the soul" when she was filled with doubts (again in her own words)

In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing.

But through this time she continued to labor, faithful to the mission to which she knew she had been called even without direct consolation.

As much as we celebrate the life of Mother Teresa, soon to be Saint, we also do not want to forget the sacrifices of countless others who live selfless lives, caring for aging parents, caring for the sick and dying, those working in hospitals or nursing homes who do the most humbling tasks with little recognition. I remember when my mother was in a nursing home at the end of her life. There was a Jamaican woman who kept an eye on her. She would dress her up and do her hair. Throughout

her life, Mom would love to dress up and be as fashionable as she could. I was so touched by the care that this woman gave my mom.

I would imagine that each of us knows someone, who is not famous like Mother Teresa, who embodies her selfless giving and service. For me it would be Sister Beverly who works in the Jesuit parish, St Anne's in Kingston Jamaica. On our parish immersion trips we would be in awe of her tireless service to the elderly, homebound, so many in this neighborhood prone to violence who came to her for hope and healing.

No it is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus. There is no "easy way out" with him but there is an "easy way in". That "easy way in" is through the heart of Jesus. He says to us, Come to me all you who labor and are burdened. Take my yolk upon you and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart and you will find rest.

If we are disturbed by the stark challenge to follow Jesus that we have in today's gospel, let's not forget that he knows and loves us as we are.
In the words of St Teresa of Calcutta: Jesus does not demand that we be successful. He asks that we be faithful. For he is always, always, always faithful to us.