

Historical Commentary



Thirteenth Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 14:25-33 from Church Fathers and John Calvin

Augustine: On another occasion, the Lord says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters, and even his own soul, cannot be my disciple.” As a rule, this is more upsetting to the mind of new Christians who are eager to begin at once to live in accordance with the precepts of Christ. To those who do not fully grasp its meaning, it would seem contradictory.... He has condescended to call his disciples to the eternal kingdom. He also called them brothers. In the kingdom these relationships are transcended, because “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor freeman, but Christ is all things and in all.” The Lord says, “For in the resurrection they will neither be married nor marry, but will be as the angels of God in heaven.” Whoever wishes to prepare himself now for the life of that kingdom must not hate people but those earthly relationships through which the present life is sustained, the temporary life that begins at birth and ends with death. Whoever does not hate this necessity does not yet love that other life in which there will be no condition of birth and death, the condition that makes marriages natural on earth.

Cyril of Alexandria: He says, “He that loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. He that loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” By adding “more than me,” it is plain that he permits us to love, but not more than we love him. He demands our highest affection for himself and that very correctly. The love of God in those who are perfect in mind has something in it superior both to the honor due to parents and to the natural affection felt for children.

Augustine: The Lord gives the signal for us to stand guard in camp and to build the tower from which we may recognize and ward off the enemy of our eternal life. The heavenly trumpet of Christ urges the soldier to battle, and his mother holds him back....

What does she say or what argument does she give? Perhaps is it those ten months when you lay in her womb and the pangs of birth and the burden of rearing you? You must kill this with the sword of salvation. You must destroy this in your mother that you may find her in life eternal. Remember, you must hate this in her if you love her, if you are a recruit of Christ and have laid the foundations of the tower. Passers by may not say, “This man began to build and was not able to finish.” That is earthly affection. It still has the ring of the “old man.” Christian warfare invites us to destroy this earthly affection both in

ourselves and in our relatives. Of course, no one should be ungrateful to his parents or mock the list of their services to him, since by them he was brought into this life, cherished and fed. A man should always pay his family duty, but let these things keep their place where higher duties do not call.

Mother church is also the mother of your mother. She conceived you both in Christ.... Know that her Spouse took human flesh that you might not be attached to fleshly things. Know that all the things for which your mother scolds you were undertaken by the eternal Word that you might not be subject to the weakness of flesh. Ponder his humiliations, scourging and death, even the death of the cross.

Basil the Great: The Father did not send the only-begotten Son, the living God, to judge the world but to save the world. True to himself and faithful to the will of the good God his Father, he points to a doctrine whereby we may be made worthy of becoming his disciples with his severe decree. He says, "If any man comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, and his wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." This hatred teaches the virtue of piety by withdrawing us from distractions and does not lead us to devise hurtful schemes against one another. "Whoever," says the Lord, "does not carry his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple." Receiving the baptism of water, we make this same agreement when we promise to be crucified and to die and to be buried with him.

Tertullian: If you want to be the Lord's disciple, you must take up your cross and follow the Lord. Take up your stress and your tortures or at least your body, which is like a cross. Parents, wives, children are all to be left for God's sake. Are you hesitating about crafts, businesses and professions for the sake of children or parents? The proof that family as well as crafts and business are to be left for the Lord's sake was given us when James and John were called by the Lord and left both father and ship. It was given when Matthew was roused from the seat of custom and when faith allowed no time even to bury a father.

Cyril of Alexandria: Next he uses two examples to encourage his friends to an unconquerable strength and to establish those who want to attain to honors by patience and endurance in an unwavering zeal. If anyone wants to build a tower, he first counts if he has sufficient means to finish it. Otherwise when he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish it, people will laugh at him. Those who choose to lead a glorious and blameless life should store up beforehand in their mind a sufficient zeal. They should remember him who says, "My son, if you come close to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for every temptation. Make your heart straight and endure." How will those who do not have this zeal be able to reach the goal that is set before them?

"Or what king," he says, "wishing to make war with another king, does not consider with himself, whether with his ten thousand he can prevail over one who is more mighty than himself?" What does this mean? "We do not wrestle against blood and flesh, but against governments, empires, the world rulers of this present darkness, and wicked spirits in the heavenly regions." We also have a crowd of other enemies. They are the fleshly mind, the law that rages in our members, passions of many kinds, the lust of pleasure, the lust of the

flesh, the lust of wealth, and others. We must wrestle with these. This is our savage troop of enemies. How will we conquer? “We will conquer believing that in God we shall do courageously,” as Scripture says, “and he will bring to nothing those that oppress us.”

Gregory of Nyssa: The Gospel somewhere says that a person who begins to build a tower but stops with the foundations and never completes it is ridiculous. What do we learn from this parable? We learn that we should work to bring every aspiration to a conclusion, completing the work of God by an elaborate building up of his commandments. One stone does not make a complete tower, nor does one commandment bring the perfection of the soul to its desired measure. It is necessary to both erect the foundation and, as the apostle says, “to lay upon it a foundation of gold and precious stones.” That is what the products of the commandments are called by the prophet when he says, “I have loved your commandment more than gold and much precious stone.”

Basil the Great: Whoever would truly be a follower of God must break the bonds of attachment to this life. This is done through complete separation from and forgetfulness of old habits. It is impossible for us to achieve our goal of pleasing God unless we snatch ourselves away from fleshly ties and worldly society. We are then transported to another world in our manner of living. The apostle said, “But our citizenship is in heaven.” The Lord specifically said, “Likewise every one of you that does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple.”

John Calvin: He does not indeed enjoin us to lay aside human affections, or forbid us to discharge the duties of relationship, but only desires that all the mutual love which exists among men should be so regulated as to assign the highest rank to piety. Let the husband then love his wife, the father his son, and, on the other hand, let the son love his father, provided that the reverence which is due to Christ be not overpowered by human affection. For if even among men, in proportion to the closeness of the tie that mutually binds us, some have stronger claims than others, it is shameful that all should not be deemed inferior to Christ alone. And certainly we do not consider sufficiently, or with due gratitude, what it is to be a disciple of Christ, if the excellence of this rank be not sufficient to subdue all the affections of the flesh. The phrase employed by Luke is more harsh, if any man doth not hate his father and mother, but the meaning is the same, “If the love of ourselves hinder us from following Christ, we must resist it, courageously:” as Paul says, what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ, for whom I suffered the loss of all things, (Philippians 3:7,8)

From particular cases he proceeds to general views, and informs us that we cannot be reckoned his disciples unless we are prepared to endure many afflictions. If we are vexed and tormented by the thought, that the gospel should set us at variance with our father, or our wife, or our children, let us remember this condition, that Christ subjects all his disciples to the cross Yet let us also bear in mind this consolation, that, in bearing the cross, we are the companions of Christ, – which will speedily have the effect of allaying all its bitterness. The reprobates are not less firmly bound to their cross, and cannot with their most violent struggles shake it off; but as to those who are out of Christ the cross is accursed, a mournful end awaits them. Let us therefore learn to connect these two things,

that believers must bear the cross in order to follow their Master; that is, in order to conform to his example, and to abide by his footsteps like faithful companions.

That no one may think it hard to follow Christ on the condition of renouncing all his desires, a useful warning is here given. We must consider beforehand what the profession of the gospel demands. The reason why many persons yield to very slight temptations is, that they have pictured to themselves unmixed enjoyment, as if they were to be always in the shade and at their ease. No man will ever become fit to serve Christ till he has undergone a long preparation for warfare.

Now the comparisons are exceedingly adapted to this object. Building is a tedious and vexatious matter, and one that gives little satisfaction on account of the expense. War, too, brings along with it many inconveniences, and almost threatens destruction to the human race, so that it is never undertaken but with reluctance. And yet the advantages of building are found to be sufficient to induce men to spend their substance on it without hesitation; while necessity drives them to shrink from no expenses in carrying on wars. But a far more valuable reward awaits those who are the builders of the temple of God, and who fight under the banner of Christ: for Christians do not labor for a temporary building, or fight for a passing triumph.

If a king find himself unable to endure the burden of a war, he prevents an ignominious defeat by seeking peace with his adversary. The statements which our Lord makes to this effect must not be applied to the present subject, in such a manner as if we were to enter into any compromise with our spiritual foe, when our strength and resources fail. It would be idle to treat parables as applying in every minute point to the matter in hand. But our Lord simply means that we ought to be so well prepared, as not to be taken by surprise for want of a proper defense, or basely to turn our backs: for it is not every one of us who is a king, to carry on war under his direction.

This doctrine reproves the rashness of those who foolishly proceed beyond their capacity, or flatter themselves without thinking of bearing the cross. Yet we must take care lest this meditation, to which Christ exhorts us, should fill us with alarm or retard our progress. Many persons, not having from the outset laid their account with suffering, relax their zeal through cowardice: for they cannot endure to be Christians on any other condition than that of being exempted from the cross. Others again, when a condition that is harsh and unpleasant to the flesh is proposed to them, do not venture to approach to Christ. But there is no good reason for being discouraged by a knowledge of our poverty, for the Lord grants to us seasonable aid. I readily acknowledge that, if we calculate the expense, we are all destitute of power to lay a single stone, or to wield a sword against the enemy. But as the materials, expense, arms, and forces, are supplied by the Lord out of heaven, no pretext on the score of difficulty can be offered by our indifference or sloth. The design of Christ, therefore, is to warn his followers to bear the cross, that they may prepare themselves with courage.

Luke 14:33. So then every one of you This clause shows what is meant by the calculation of expenses, with which Christ enjoins his followers to begin: it is to lead them to consider that they must forsake all In vain do persons who are delighted with an easy, indolent life, and with exemption from the cross, undertake a profession of Christianity. Those persons are said to forsake all who prefer Christ so greatly, both to their own life, and to all the wishes of the flesh, that nothing deters them from the right course.

It would be absurd to insist on a literal interpretation of the phrase, as if no man were a disciple of Christ, till he threw into the sea all that he possessed, divorced his wife, and bade farewell to his children. Such idle dreams led foolish people to adopt a monastic life, as if those who intend to come to Christ must leave off humanity. Yet no man truly forsakes all that he possesses till he is prepared at every instant to leave all, gives himself free and unconstrained to the Lord, and, rising above every hindrance, pursues his calling. Thus the true self-denial which the Lord demands from his followers does not consist so much in outward conduct as in the affections; so that every one must employ the time which is passing over him without allowing the objects which he directs by his hand to hold a place in his heart.