

The Cost of Discipleship

Sermon for Second Sunday in Lent, March 8 2009

Rev. Franklin E. Vilas, D.Min.

The underlying theme that runs throughout the scriptures selected for the Sundays in Lent this year is that of Covenant. In the Revised Common Lectionary, which provides the weekly scriptures now for the Roman Catholic Church and sixteen protestant denominations including the Episcopal Church this is a time to focus on the relationship between God and the creation, of which the human race is a vital element.

Last Sunday, Rabbi Lawrence Troster spoke about the biblical covenant between God and Noah, along with all created life on Earth. He spoke of the perception of God as the source and the sustainer of life. For the Hebrew writers of the Book of Genesis, the rainbow was a symbol of the response of the Creator to the worship and fidelity of the human race, embodied in Noah.

In our Old Testament lesson for today, the covenant between God and Abram is described. Here is reaffirmed the relationship between the one who would be the first patriarch of the people of God and his Creator. On his side, the Lord changes the name of Abram to Abraham, and guarantees that he will be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations".

On Abraham's side of the agreement, the key word is Faith. "I will be God to you and to your offspring after you", says the Lord. In exchange, Abraham acknowledges Yahweh as his God— and his "faith was reckoned to him as righteousness", says the writer of the Epistle to the Romans. Then in the Gospel Jesus describes the cost of such a faith to himself. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed."

This is too much for Peter, whose natural human reaction is to reject this darker side of the reality of existence. He takes Jesus aside and, Mark says, begins to rebuke him. Jesus, in turn, sees in Peter the hand of Satan at work. To the one whom he had just called "blessed" and given the name of the Rock, Jesus flares up and rejects the tempting words that might change his fate.

He then utters in Mark those words which have become the challenge to Christians ever since. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." If Christmas, Epiphany and Easter affirm the joy and the victory of the Gospel, the season of Lent reminds us of the demands and the cost of discipleship to the believer.

One of the great books in Christian literature was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and carries that title: *The Cost of Discipleship*. You may remember that Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who headed an underground seminary in Germany during the period of the Third Reich. Implicated in one of the plots to assassinate Adolph Hitler, he was imprisoned in concentration camps, and executed at Flossenbergr by hanging just as the World War II was ending in 1945.

In his classic work on discipleship, Bonhoeffer spends the first part of his book describing the tendency of the church and of individual Christians to seek for what he calls "cheap grace". This is grace which is sold at the marketplace at no real cost. "The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin and

the consolations of religion are thrown away," he writes, "at cut-rate prices." Bonhoeffer is speaking of the tendency that we all have as human beings to seek the gifts of grace without being willing to pay the real costs of full discipleship.

This is reflected in our common tendency to see the church more as a club than as a band of dedicated followers of the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. Even our terminology, which refers to us as members of the church, rather than as disciples, implies that Christians come to church often as passive observers, seeking to be inspired and entertained, rather than as what we used to call "Christian soldiers", being equipped to fight the ongoing war against evil and injustice in the world about us.

Bonhoeffer seeks in his writing to introduce Christians once more to what he calls "costly grace"—the grace which Jesus spoke of in our gospel for today that results in "saving our life"—or, in the old translation, "saving our soul." Grace, of course, cannot be earned. But the true depths of the spiritual life that we all thirst for is not passively received. "Costly grace", says Bonhoeffer, "confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart." The season of Lent reminds us that we find it in active response to the call of Christ to follow him.

Certainly we are not all called in our lives to the martyrdom that was experienced by the early Christians, or by Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the hands of Hitler. But we are called to the kind of death that comes through transformation, through becoming what St. Paul calls elsewhere a new creation.

In words which now seem prophetic in the light of his own fate, Bonhoeffer gives a challenge which has echoed through the years:

"Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share: some God deems worthy of the highest form of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others he does not allow to be tempted above that they are able to bear. But it is one and the same cross in any case. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of our encounter with Christ.... (For) When Christ calls a (person), he bids them come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time— death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call."

These words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, echoing those of Jesus in our Gospel for today and empowered by his own witness and fate, are hard to hear, but essential to our spiritual life as individuals and as a church. They remind us that Christianity is not the pablum of feel-good religions that are offered by some televangelists in our day and age. They remind us as well that the New Covenant brought to the world by Jesus and his followers, what we call the "New Testament", is a call not to cheap grace and a comfortable life, but a challenge to live our lives dedicated to a purpose, and to a set of values that transcend those of human history. It is a challenge to live beyond the barriers of human vision and action, and to seek to create a world in which the laws of Love preached by Jesus are the context of human affairs.

As individuals, the Season of Lent calls us to reflect on how we have been living our lives— what our commitment to the Gospel has cost us. Where in our journey have we been willing to die to

selfish desires and goals, that the light of Christ may be brought to others? This may be in terms of the discipline of stewardship– in the offering of our time, talent and treasure in the service of God.

It may be in terms of loss in our life’s journey– offering up to the Lord those natural transitions of a job change, a move to another location, or the loss of a loved one or of a meaningful relationship. Such times may be devastating and tragic, but they may also be offered up as a cross that can change and enrich our lives.

As communities, we need to reflect on the message of the cost of discipleship. The parish of St. Mark’s has itself been through a difficult time in recent years. The loss of a trusting relationship with a rector, and then the painful transition through an interim period which has seen the loss of people and funds to the parish, has called other faithful parishioners to bear the cross of discipleship in a time of uncertainty.

In the person of the Rev. Rick Morley, a new rector has now been called to St. Mark’s, and hope for the future has been revived. But this is not a time to slacken in our discipleship. Indeed, it is a time, Lent tells us, to recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ and to his Church, that band of disciples who witness to his message in this time and in this place.

As we walk through Lent in 2009, may we remember the life, witness and words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Gospel which moved them.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. “