

Let's start with the letter to the Galatians, in which St. Paul reminds us that we are not burdened by God's demands because the Spirit has given us the gift of freedom. But freedom does not mean that "we can do whatever we want because we can always go to confession later!" Freedom is not given for self-indulgence, but for service; freedom is not a gift given to be used for selfish purposes, but for the sake of others. He says freedom isn't given so we can satisfy desires of the flesh, which means earthly pursuits and things that don't last; freedom is a gift so that we have the liberty to follow the desire of the Spirit, which means heavenly pursuits and things that lead us to eternal life. God gives us freedom because our choice is never forced or coerced by God – we always have the freedom to say "yes, I will follow you," or "no I won't."

That's a choice being made by three different disciples described in Luke's Gospel. In typical Middle Eastern fashion, Jesus uses exaggeration to make his point about the serious demands of discipleship. The three of them want to be followers of Jesus, but each of them also has some excuse or desire. Luke makes this point – remember where Jesus is headed – he's on the way to Jerusalem where he will die. So if you're going to be one of his followers, you better be prepared to make a total commitment, and not presume you can follow him at a safe distance or in some sort of half-hearted manner. To be his disciple means to go where he's going and to suffer with him; to pick up your cross and follow him.

Each of the prospective disciples has an issue that gets in the way

- one of them has possessions, and being a disciple demands "mobility," the capacity to pick up and go; for most of us, we have too many things, and they can get in the way of taking action;
- the second one wants to give priority to his family obligations (and remember in Jesus' society that was always a very high priority); but for Jesus' disciples there is a new priority: to take care of many people in need, and not just one's own blood relatives; this is a strong demand that many of us find very hard to accept as a real demand of our discipleship;
- finally, the third one wants to go back first; but for a disciple of Jesus, there's no "going back" or hanging on to the way it was before; it's change forever; it's a major whole-life commitment, and not just something to dabble around in.

These are all ways of telling us what is necessary to be real true disciples of Jesus, ways to make sure our eyes are open to what is expected. But they are not intended to be burdens, or as Paul calls it, "a yoke of slavery." Instead, God gives us freedom to choose, freedom to embrace the discipline that's necessary, freedom to choose the path we want and then follow that path to its end.

We can call this sacrifice, and it is – it is true sacrifice because it is the path that leads to holiness. But sacrifice has some overtones of blood, or suffering, even voluntarily making things hard as if the pain itself is good. That's not the kind of sacrifice we're talking about. The sacrifice of discipleship is the path of self-discipline that comes with generous love – it's the sacrifice that comes with being a parent; it's not the pursuit of pain but the path of generous love for the sake of others.

I think it's similar to those who make a decision to achieve a hard and lofty goal, such as a plan to become an Olympic athlete. First, it's an act of freedom, a choice, not something forced on a person. Second, the athletes then make further choices in freedom – they exercise discipline in what they eat; they choose to spend many hours each day practicing their skills. They know that dabbling in it, just practicing once in a while, will not allow them to reach their goal. They don't experience their discipline as a burden, it's a sacrifice, not because it's painful, but because it's the path to achieve their goal.

I fear that too many of us are like the disciples in the Gospel passage – we are enthusiastic about wanting to be a disciple of Jesus; but not so committed. We have lots of excuses – I have so many things, and here's why I have to have them; I can't do that now because I have to do this and that; let me take care of my own desires first and I'll be a better disciple later. These are not the responses of an Olympic athlete; and they are not responses of true disciples, either.

To be Jesus' disciple means that I'll go where he's going and when necessary I'll suffer with him; it means that I will pick up my cross and follow him. To be his disciple means that I'll make sacrifices in order to stay on the path of "generous love for the sake of others." God gives us freedom because God will never force or coerce me to be a disciple of Jesus – I always have the freedom to say "Yes, I will follow you," or "No I won't."