

The demanding cost, glorious blessing of discipleship

There were many who observed Jesus closely as he went about his business. Some knew him as lifelong friend and neighbor, others as a local tradesman like so many others. Some knew of his devotion to his widowed mother, others of his quiet fidelity to the law and things spiritual.

One day he left the obscure security of home and trade and began to speak publicly of his Father, to beckon others to the truth that something new was happening. He not only told them about this new life, he showed it to them — and many took notice. They found him fascinating, his words appealing, his miracles tantalizing and even persuasive.

They observed hangers-on accompany him on his walks around town and across desert roads to the next towns, and some wondered if it wouldn't be interesting to actually go on one of those walks. Others watched from their rooftops, knowing his name but not really knowing him. Some asked friends if it was worthwhile giving him the time of day, while others simply ignored him as one more in a succession of teachers who had come and gone over the years.

Many admired him.

They admired his welcoming demeanor, his smile, his peaceful spirit. They admired his lessons about spendthrift sons and merciful fathers, about seeds sown carelessly and weeds thriving stubbornly, about wedding banquets and the hungry poor and about lost things and just judgments. Who could not identify with such colorful imagery from lives they lived, people they knew and earth they plowed?

Disconcerting things

They watched God's power at work in him: The man who had been blind his whole life could now see, and the troubled man who used to beg by the gate could now hold down a job and feed his family. There were rumors of a little girl who at his touch awakened from death and a friend of his who walked out of the tomb three days after death when Jesus called his name.

No doubt about it, he struck a nerve, and something within them listened and yearned for more. But there were also disconcerting things.

There was glorious talk of God forgiv-



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ing the worst of sins, but there was also the implication that we are to forgive just as magnanimously. He said that in order to find our lives we would have to lose them, but how could that be possible? He insinuated that there are crosses to carry and that he himself would die on one and then rise — but how could he be our Savior if he

dies? And whoever heard of resurrection from the dead?

There was extreme talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, and it was well known that many of his admirers walked away when he said such things. He even claimed to be God's only Son — and if that be true, well, everything had changed.

It could be a good thing to listen to him, to put into practice some of his lessons; but to accept him as Son of God without question, to let go of my approach and my opinions, well, that was another thing altogether.

True disciples?

Many admired him, but only some followed him.

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) wrote:

"What, then, is the difference between an admirer and a follower? A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires ...

"The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in word he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. No, no. The follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires."

There were those in Jesus' own day who knew him well and liked what he did and said but never followed him, who never became his disciples. Do we some-

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times live as mere admirers, holding back from giving him everything? Do we clutch tenaciously, even if unwittingly, to our stubborn will or to ways of living opposed to the ways of God? Are we too afraid, too proud or too egotistical to give him everything and confess that we have sinned?

Lent is a time for us to ask: Are we mere admirers of Jesus, or do we desire to be his true followers, his true disciples?

Our Everything

You and I don't find it any easier to follow Jesus than did countless Christians who have gone before us. But just like them, we can take courage in his unflinching fidelity to us, his patience and his mercy, as we aspire with all our strength to become true disciples.

An admirer can walk away, because there is no real attachment. As Jesus watched some of his admirers leave him because they found his teaching hard (see Jn 6:60–71), he thought sadly about what they were giving up. He said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?"

Lent gives us 40 days in his company to renounce what does not belong to his ways, to abandon everything, to resolve to stay with him permanently, and to allow him to reconstruct us by his grace. He is Son of God, Savior, Eternal Word, our Peace, our Hope — our Everything. He knows we have more to hand over to him, and we know that he alone has the words of eternal life.

As the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI comes to an end, many things are being said of his extraordinary legacy. It is very clear to me that this humble, prayerful, brilliant pope has wanted to do one thing above all: to proclaim Christ to us and to the world, to help us become true disciples, and teach us to open our hearts to the blessings God lavishes upon us in the gift of faith.

Thank you, Holy Father, for teaching us Jesus and for helping us be faithful to him. Thank you for making clear both the demanding cost and the glorious blessing of discipleship. Thank you for showing us by your very life what it means to be a true follower, a true disciple, of Jesus.

We owe you a deep debt of gratitude, and you will always be in our prayers.