

**The Cost of Being a Christian**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year C**  
**Luke 9: 18-24**  
**20 June 2010**

In the film *Black Robe* a young French Jesuit priest sets off on a journey into the vast rural hinterland of 17<sup>th</sup> century Canada intent on evangelising the Indians. Isolation, mockery, misunderstanding, captivity, a beating or two, and many other hardships come his way. Yet he does not waver.

In one of the times of discouragement he looks back to an event that originally inspired him. He was serving at Mass back in France as a layman when the priest extended his arms in the position of prayer at the altar. Just at that moment it becomes clear how horribly mutilated he is. He learns that it was the Indians in the Canadian interior who did this to the priest, and that he intends to return to them. The young man resolves to follow in his footsteps.

What staggering commitment missionaries have shown in the last few hundred years to take the gospel to people who often didn't want to know! In closing with them they sometimes found them to be deadly oppositional reactors. Yet even then their perspective on their own violent death often tended to be that of Bishop John Coleridge Patterson, the first martyr of Melanesia, "whose life was taken by those for whom he would freely have given it."

Yet we can put a distance between these heroic tales of Christian sacrifice that seem to be part of a different world. And we can wonder if all this was really necessary. The suspicion grows at the back of our minds that this was all part and parcel of an earlier more fanatical age. Has there been a misunderstanding here of what the gospel actually requires, particularly when we belong to such a reasonable, easy going branch of the Christian faith?

When Jesus asks his closest followers who they reckon him to be, this sparks off an interesting review of all the great heroes of Israel's prophetic past. A compare and contrast exercise gets under way between them and the Jesus they have come to know. It is Peter who hits the jackpot by fitting him in to a category that is bigger and more startling than anything else that they have been thinking about. So the disciples settle back from this startling but rather satisfying and all-illuminating theological discussion.

But the dialogue isn't allowed to stop there. Apparently this insight is only shared with those who must also take on board the tragic fate about to befall Jesus. And if this wasn't enough to struggle with, it turns out that a similar sort of rough treatment and troubled future is highly likely to come the way of all those who have thrown in their lot

with him. As the rest of the gospel unfolds this call to accept the suffering and death of Jesus as an expression of God's will becomes a central motif. It is something that the disciples will have a great deal of difficulty with. And the follow on message about the need for the disciples to put aside their quite natural and strongly rooted instinct for self-preservation is a request and a requirement that often gets put in the too hard basket. So right from the start this part of the gospel message is something that the Church hasn't wanted to hear about, much less do anything about.

Yet for a while this wasn't something that Christians had to agonise over too much. In a way the Roman Empire did the Church a favour by persecuting it. In this sort of a situation it was crystal clear that you were inviting trouble in to your life by becoming a Christian. And since there tended to be a long, careful preparation process of at least a year before baptism, believers had plenty of opportunity to consider the costly implications of the choice they were making.

Still, only three hundred years separates the conversion of St Paul and the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. From then on the more ambiguous form of Christian existence that we are familiar with had got under way. As Christianity sort of worked its way in to the surrounding social fabric being a good Christian tended to be rather like being a good citizen. The call for costly commitment and the need to embrace the path of suffering as an inescapable part of the gospel became muted. There were those who weren't happy about this muddled toning down of the gospel. They went off and started monasticism and religious communities.

So why is this grief and strife part of the gospel there in the first place? The Christian diagnosis of the situation that we are in is that sometime back a rebellion was launched against God, and his blueprint for human happiness. That famous revolutionary slogan of Tom Paine, "Give me liberty, or give me death" is one that God was prepared to take seriously. The human race was given the freedom it craved to go its own way, and to make itself unhappy in ways of its own choosing. There are those theologians who would argue that even this was part of God's design. He could see that the final reconciliation that would be achieved with the wayward human race would be even more satisfying because it would be the outcome of a deeply convinced choice. But getting to that choice would require sacrifice. The please come home message and messenger positively invited rejection and retaliation. Yet somehow in that deadly zone of Divine emissary assassination something new comes in to the situation that has the potential to change and convert assassins and rejectors.

The other truth about this unpopular part of the gospel message is that the more God's goodness and joy comes in to the world the more

the status quo of shabby, grumpy evil decides it has to do something about it. It strikes back in direct proportion to the amount of unsettling Divine love that has come fresh and new minted in to the world. If a Church or a Christian has become an initiating part of that flow of God's goodness, truth, beauty, love in to the world then watch out – they have gone looking for trouble, and it will find them. A contemporary preacher memorably summed it up this way. "If you fail to love then it will be as though you have never really lived at all, but if you love effectively you may end up getting killed for it."

The last thing I want to mention about this is that when we become a deeply convinced Christian, and if our local Church has some degree of Christian reality about it, then the quality of our life together in the Church means that life itself takes on a heightened quality of existence. Life becomes lived out in such a way that our definition and our experience of what joy and sorrow and fulfilment and suffering means, begins to change radically. We feel more intensely, we love more wisely, our moral discernment grows, our capacity for endurance and patience increases, and we acquire the kind of stamina that can take setbacks and misfortunes and even tragedy in our stride. David Meconi puts it wonderfully well when he writes:

The early church saw discipleship not so much as a matter of fulfilling various ethical prescriptions but more as the faithful's taking on properly divine attributes: a blissful immortality, a fiery love, an unquenchable joy."

When you have got a fiery love, and an unquenchable joy in your heart – when you are convinced that a blissful immortality is ahead of you, then you would even be prepared to set off into the wild interior of 17<sup>th</sup> century Canada to evangelise wild Indians.