

Thirteenth Sunday of the Year June 26, 2016

1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21; Gal. 5:1, 13-18; Luke. 9:51-62

Every human person in today's world seeks to find meaning to his or her life. People particularly young ones are often discouraged when they are unable to perceive the why of life and aim to search for it in wrong and absurd ways. According to the theologian Paul Tillich the word God translates as the depth of our life, the source of our being, and our ultimate concern, what we take seriously without any reservations. So our search for meaning connects with our search for God. Every human person has a purpose to fulfil in life. All have a specific task and are individually called by God for a task or a mission. The call that God gives is personal. We will not comprehend the mission easily unless we are totally attentive to his calling. There is the constant search for God in the heart of every person. There is a need of quietness and withdrawal to recognise the presence of God in our life. Although we are not necessarily called to sacrifice security or our personal idea of duty or the affection of a family as Jesus was, today's liturgy challenges us to re-examine our attachments that may be holding us back from a joyful and liberated following of Jesus. These attachments may be small or big, family or wealth, insecurity or protection. But we are to examine them as we approach closer to Jesus.

In the first reading the Prophet finds a candidate who is totally committed to God to succeed him. Elijah the Prophet presumed his service to God was at an end; he even prayed for his death. But God had several plans and kept many things in store for the prophet to do, including the anointing of his successor. Elijah finds his successor busy at work ploughing a field. After years of drought the people at last are hopeful for rain and the promise of a rich harvest. In the narratives of the Bible such conditions have less to do with weather patterns and more to do with the response of the people for God's call for sincere faith. It is also noteworthy that Prophet Elijah's successor Elisha is engaged in work that sustains life. This indicates also the spiritual nourishment the prophet will give in the years to come. Elisha seems to presume that the invitation he has is from Elijah and from no one else. He does not see any urgency in the call and wants to say farewell to his family. But the prophet makes it clear that the call is not human but from God himself. Now Elisha makes a total sacrifice of his oxen and plough. He receives the mantles from Elijah which represents the personality of the owner and indicates the official clothes of the Prophet with a divine call. He is chosen to care the people of God.

In the second reading of today Paul teaches a lesson to the gentile converts that they must not give any attention to the false teaching of Judaizers. Jesus Christ has come to free them from the slavery to the Old Law and remove from them the burden of religious legalism. They are to practice the freedom that comes from the Spirit. This freedom will make them slaves of one another in love. Being called to freedom from the Old Law does not mean they can do what they like. They must not let the flesh that is the language of St Paul the unspiritual inclinations in a human person, the weak and sinful human nature have a free reign. All earthly human inclinations must be totally curbed. The Christian religion does not free anyone from this obligation. To the extent that the Spirit takes hold of the followers of Christ, they ought not to give in to the flesh. Paul warns that in spite of the Spirit's presence within us, we still experience opposition from the flesh. So he invites the new converts to live in the Spirit and also follow the Spirit. Therefore if they are to live the true Christian life, loving God and loving the neighbour, aided by the grace of God will help them to keep all worldly inclinations under check.

The opening passage of the Gospel of today begins with the journey of Jesus and his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem where his mission on earth was to end. Luke tells us that he was resolutely determined, indicating of setting something up that will be immovable, like setting something in concrete. Jesus, in walking toward Jerusalem, is walking toward the celestial city, to embrace his sufferings and cross. He was on his way to the triumph of his glory: throughout all his life here on earth, he proclaimed his glorification on the cross and his triumph at the end times. His purpose of coming into this world was to proclaim the Kingdom of God. He proclaimed this Kingdom at the beginning of his ministry to the people. Now Jesus walks toward Jerusalem with the message of fulfilment of the Kingdom. His triumph and glorification was near, and he sent ahead some disciples to prepare for this unique and incomparable event. We certainly remember Palm Sunday where he entered gloriously into Jerusalem. On that occasion, in order to prepare for his glorious entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus had also sent some disciples: they were to look for a donkey colt that was to serve as his mount. The disciples were the messengers who went and brought a colt on which no one has ever yet sat. Here the Samaritans did not want to receive people who walk toward Jerusalem. The journey to Jerusalem became a framework for Jesus to teach his followers and us what it means to be a disciple. The messengers whom he sent ahead were those who prepared for the spiritual journey.

Jesus voluntarily set out on this journey towards Jerusalem. No sooner did his journey begin then the serious opposition he encountered. The Samaritans rejected

the attempt of Jesus to enter the village because they knew he was heading towards Jerusalem, and at that time the animosity between the Samaritans and Jews was harsh and explosive. They never mixed with each other and refused to have any companionship or fellowship meal. They had been enemies to each other for the past five centuries. When they saw the rejection the disciples were upset and they felt that these inhospitable Samaritans must be taught a lesson. The solution of James and John to this rejection was to call down fire and destruction on the Samaritans. However, even though it was right and essential for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, he refused to achieve that mission through the use of violence. Contrary even to some who went before Jesus, such as Elijah, violence is not an acceptable tool for doing ultimately what is right. Jesus came not to enforce violence but to break its destructive cycle. He rebuked his disciple for revenge is not response of the merciful Christ. He could fully understand the reason for this lack of hospitality.

The second part of the gospel contains the lesson that should strike all of us most, is the insistence of Jesus on total dedication on the part of his true follower to his service. We cannot be for Christ and against him at the same time. Jesus had already said that he, who did not gather with him, would scatter. This reminds us of the sincerity of the following of the master and our dedication to him. When the person volunteered to follow him, he was told that if he wanted to be a disciple, his life must be a life of total dedication, with no fixed abode or external ties, ready to move at every call. In dealing with this first man who wished to be his disciple Jesus showed his knowledge of the tendency of people to be calculating and cautious. Before doing anything people try to calculate and see which way the wind is blowing and seek for the security for the future. Jesus had sacrificed security in his life and invited his followers to do the same.

Jesus invited the second person who was ready to follow except for a loyal filial piety which is holding him back. He will follow when he has buried his father. It was unlikely that the father of the young man was dead. It was fulfilling his duties as a son to carry out the command of caring for his parents. Jesus is not forbidding the young man to carry out for his father what his duty as son imposes on him. He is emphasising the contrast between his gospel and the gospel of life, for which the earthly death is but a door to real life. This person illustrates the fact that to follow Jesus one must even sacrifice one's own idea of duty. Jesus made the point that in everything, there is a crucial moment when one is expected to act. This was this man's crucial moment and he missed it. We do the same when we do not realize the benefits of self-discipline. Jesus invites each person to travel with him in life keeping in mind the goal of the Kingdom above anything else.

With the third person Jesus demanded the total dedication and not half hearted acceptance. The person placed certain conditions for following Christ on his mission. He wanted first to say good bye to his people at home. The reply of Jesus indicated that his follower must be willing to sacrifice, if necessary, any affection in the resolve to follow Christ. Jesus gives a well-known image from agriculture. The farmer while ploughing a field concentrates all his faculties and energies on what lies ahead. The man looking back will do badly. So also it must be with the disciple of Jesus. One who does not concentrate on the Lord is not worthy of the Kingdom of God. Just like the good farmer he has to concentrate in what he is doing and not look elsewhere. In true discipleship, there is no turning back and seek the worldly ways. As Disciples of Christ, we are expected to continuously move forward by growing in our spiritual lives through the grace of God the Father and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in the Name of Jesus. Thus we hear the Gospel speaking about true discipleship and the faithful following of Jesus. A disciple is one who is learning or has learned from a master or teacher, or one who follows the teachings prescribed by the master. Sacred Scripture records that the disciples followed Jesus during his public ministry and received instruction from Him regarding the Good News of salvation and the fullness of revelation. It was a deep personal experience of self-discovery, struggle, service and growth. While it is personal, the journey of discipleship is not private. A Disciple does not walk alone with Christ but walks along with others. Discipleship is not for the weak and ambivalent. Jesus teaches that lesson very clearly. Those who want to be followers of Jesus must be convinced that discipleship demands priority over everything else. Discipleship is ultimately about being willing to lay down one's life for another. This requires radical commitment and faithfulness. Things that in and of themselves are not bad such as having a stable place to stay, burying one's relatives and saying farewell to the family, do not have a priority in the life of a disciple. This might seem harsh and even cruel especially to modern hearers. But they present full measure of the value and demand of discipleship. Jesus demands that one must be ready and willing to go ahead and be with him without looking back.

The word of God has a message to us from God. Jesus sends his disciples ahead to prepare a place for him to rest, and, as he is walking, he meets a man to whom he declares that he has no place where he can lay his head! This shows us clearly that the most important sense of these words is the eschatological sense of which we spoke above: Jesus sends his disciples in order to prepare for his return in glory in the end times. Meanwhile, Jesus and his disciples walk here and there, proclaiming the kingdom of God, always going forward, in spite of obstacles and traps of all kinds. We know this because Jesus said to the disciples of Emmaus

that it was necessary for the Christ thus to suffer, and then enter into His glory. People who want to sort out their life have to remind themselves that Jesus is the way to do it. Like Paul and Peter we have to make courageous choices.

Once we meet Christ, only one thing is and must be important for us: to accomplish the mission which he confided in us. Yes, he who meets Christ in his life, through the calling of grace, must imitate Saint Paul, when he said: "But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13-14) Surely, only the future must count for us. What we are going to do for Christ, what we accomplish today to proclaim the kingdom of God in all aspects of our life, this is what is important, and this is what gives our life on earth all its meaning. Let us therefore choose God with the same responsible abandon of Elisha following Elijah, the same true freedom mentioned by Paul and the same resolve of Jesus going to Jerusalem. Let us each of us discern the Jerusalem we must face in our lives, whether it be someone we dislike or a person we are not in good terms or a duty we have been avoiding. That kind of commitment and effort free us from all worldly situations and help us go ahead without fear.

Mr. Girard, an atheist millionaire of Philadelphia, one Saturday ordered all his clerks to come the next day to his wharf and help unload the newly arrived ship. One young man replied quietly: "Mr. Girard, I can't work on Sundays." "You know our rules?" "Yes, I know, but I can't work on Sundays." "Well, step up to the desk and the cashier will settle with you." For three weeks the young man could find no work, but one day a banker came to Girard to ask if he could recommend a man for cashier in a new bank. The discharged young man was at once named as a suitable person. Although Girard had dismissed the man, he recognized his sterling character. Anyone who could sacrifice his own interests for what he believed to be right would make a loyal trustworthy cashier.

A certain woman given much to piety had a dream. She was told that Jesus himself would come to her and she must prepare herself and wait for him. She got up very early, cleaned the house, kept things ready for the guest including a meal and waited for the Lord. As she was standing there with expectation a beggar woman came asking for food. The woman was annoyed and chased her out saying I am waiting for an important guest and come another day and I will help you. Then her neighbour came to her and asked for some urgent help and she refused saying she was busy as she was waiting for an important guest. Then a school boy came to her asking for some help as he was not able to get the necessary books and she refused. The day went on. Several people turned up at the gate for help or

request of some kind or other and Jesus did not come. Sadly she went to sleep that night and she had a dream. In her dream the Lord came again and she began to complain to him telling how he had let her down. Jesus told her, “My friend, I came to you several times and you refused to recognize me. I was the beggar woman who was hungry, I was the neighbour who needed the help, and I was the school boy who needed support. Whatever you do to the little of my brothers you do it to me.”

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India