

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
September 8, 2019

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Our Lord Jesus is on the road. A great crowd of people believe He is the Messiah. They stay close to Him. They do not want to miss the expected excitement and the blessings that would inaugurate the return of the great Davidic era. The reign of King David marked the high point in Israel's political fortunes. The expected Messiah would usher in a return to this prosperity. *Or so the people thought.*

That is what was happening in today's gospel passage. And so our Lord Jesus warned this crowd that following Him involved a great deal more than just wandering down the road to see what will happen next! Here then in the Lord's teaching are these parables of the rash builder, the rash king, and if we had gone on a bit further, the famous example of salt with no taste. All these teachings illustrate conditions of Christian discipleship. Those conditions are that we count the cost, and bear the Cross by renouncing all possessions in our affirmation of the priority of Christ, and that we live our lives in a spirit of sacrifice.

In His teaching, Our Lord usually stated a principle and then left His hearers to figure out the implications. But at the heart of *this* occasion these parables are about counting the cost of discipleship. Remembering them, St Theresa of Avila reminded us we are to *work hard* at following Christ. This advice is not so much that it is better not to begin and fail, but rather it is *sheer folly* to begin the Christian life without much consideration. That consideration must be in the agenda of any preparation for Holy Confirmation.

Many people have reduced the life of Christ to sentimentality. So they are surprised if and when they discover the saints have likened our discipleship to *practical* things; industry, agriculture, military life, and even professional sports! Saint Benedict called the Divine Office "the work of God." The Cistercians were as efficient at farming as at prayer and saw the connection between the two. Saint Ignatius used military terminology in his writing about the spiritual life. And the very term "*ascetic*," which describes the technique and doctrine of prayer, comes from a Greek word meaning "*athletic training*."

Many people dodge the authority of Christ by dwelling upon His compassion. Yes, Jesus had a holy love for Mary Magdalene. Yes, He shed tears for the dead

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Lazarus. But why do we even remember these events, or remember Jesus at all? We remember because of the stern and disciplined duty of Christ's Passion and Death on the Cross. *That was Christ's work!* He suffered and died for our salvation. It is absolutely crucial to remember the Gospels show Christ not only loving His disciples but also *training them*. And we have no reason to think His attitude or approach has changed. In Christianity, then, *fact precedes feeling*. What we do depends upon what we are, not the other way round. In my high school days Dorothy Bock describing her trigonometry class, said: "it's not like eating Hershey bars, and no one is going to do it for you." It is the blunt efficiency of Christian discipleship that is the creator of devotion in the true sense. And there is no short cut.

You and I think it is quite wonderful when a man sticks to his daily employment during a long illness, or a professional athlete chooses to play in pain in order not to let down his teammates. A soldier who keeps fighting after being wounded gets a medal. But when a Christian carries on with prayer when his prayers seem dull and dry as dust, he is called *insincere*. When he assists at Mass, and feels it tiresome or boring, he is labeled *irreverent*. And if he struggles under temptation, falls into sin, goes to confession, and then struggles and falls again, over and over, he is called a *hypocrite*. This attitude is sheer nonsense! For the Christian, prayer is *work*, discipleship is the *call to a job*, and conversion to Christ is not so much a psychological experience as it is a *professional status*. All the saints have said so. Like the wounded athlete or soldier, we may not always be doing our job brilliantly. But the Christian has counted the cost, as Christ directed, and he is now paying the price. The Christian knows it is God's will we pursue holiness in this life, cooperating with God's grace in the means He had provided. In God's good time, that will fit us and equip us for life everlasting with the One we say we love.