

Proper 18 C
St. 14:25-33
September 4, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Counting the Cost

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

It's the beginning of the month, and paychecks have magically, electronically arrived in our bank accounts, whether from our employers or Social Security, the supply of lettuce has been replenished. We feel flush again...for a day or so.

And that would be until we sit down and pay our bills. The big question here is: *'Do I have enough to pay for everything?'* And if we are lucky we might; and even more so, if we are careful with our spending and finances, we do, have enough that is.

But most folks do not have the option to make big decisions about what they will do or buy, without first counting the cost, like the tower builder in the Gospel. Want to take a vacation and go on a cruise? Can we afford it? Want to get a new car? How will that impact the monthly budget, not just in terms of the car loan, but also increased property taxes and insurance? Things are so tight for a large number of people these days that even more mundane expenses cause us to count the cost: Can I afford all my groceries this week? Where

Can I cut back? Shall I buy chicken instead of beef? I need a new pair of jeans, but when will I be able to afford to buy them? The electric bill is coming due, so I wonder if I can make an arrangement with the electric company to spread out the cost over the whole year? We call this living (or should I say-barely living-) check to check. You would be surprised how many of your neighbors who work sometimes two jobs have to do this to get by. And then there are the retired people and disabled folks on fixed incomes who count the cost and the figures don't add up to even making it. When do you decide to swallow your pride and head to the local food pantry or Mobile Foodshare Truck, so you can make ends meet and be able to put food on your table? Even then, sometimes it is far from enough to make do.

Count the cost. What does it cost a body and soul to be poor? What toll does it take on your physical and mental health? And our poor might start looking like they are well off when you look at how some human beings live in this world in sub-Saharan Africa, South America, India, some of our own Native Americans out West and people in many other places on this earth, where they sometimes go for days without eating food and where even fresh water is a precious commodity. This is what you call being dirt poor. Count the cost.

Counting the cost as I prepare my monthly and weekly budget, I look at what I can afford. That's more fun and easier for me when you are talking about simple basics. Then I look longingly at what I cannot afford. But there is an even more important question for all of use to ask when we count the cost of the future: *what can I not afford to miss out on?*

We know that we must not let certain things in life pass us by. Sometimes it is a concert which comes to town starring a

favorite performer and this will likely be your only chance to hear them. Sometimes it is as simple as getting to go to a movie. Sometimes it is the opportunity of seeing an old friend again, maybe for one last time. And sometimes it is giving voice to the four-letter word that drove the ministry of Jesus on earth. Sometimes it is the opportunity to embody that word.

Sometimes what we cannot afford to miss out on is the opportunity to say thanks. Sometimes it would be the opportunity to pray with God. You count the cost of missing such a privileged opportunity. Is the price of missing such an opportunity worth what we actually ended up spent our time on? I have paid that price, and I regret it to this day. When we miss something or someone we cannot afford to miss, it is to our everlasting discredit. There is no amount of money that can buy back such an opportunity.

What does it cost to be a Christian? Some might go to their checkbooks and count up their weekly pledge to the church. And they might also add up what they have given to charity. However good these things are to do, they are only a place to begin looking at the cost of being a Christian.

What is the cost of being a Christian? Hear the words of Jesus himself: *"So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."* These are *hard* words for *me* to hear. Even though I have begun the process of simplifying much in my life, I have not simplified enough. I have not given up all my possessions. However, each day I am slowly working on it. Each day I look for opportunities to divest myself of the excess stuff I have hoarded in my home and storage unit, and try to find good homes where that stuff will do some good or bring some joy to someone else. *"Go sell what you have and give to the poor."* These are special words of

Jesus which echo in my ears, words by that I try, but fail to live by. They are a standard by which a life may be measured.

The problem isn't so much owning things, even a lot of things. The problem is *being owned by them*. How often can I recall being consumed with concerns about the security or maintenance of my stuff? Is the house door locked and secure? Did I leave the refrigerator door open? Did I lock the car door? (How many times have I gone back to check if it is locked, even after beeping the door lock!) Is that person making me feel nervous about my wallet or I-Phone while I am standing in a line at the store or on the train platform?

Owning or being owned: please count the cost of the latter! Are we slaves or are we free? The words of Jesus inspire me not only to simplify my life, but also to shed those earthly attachments which distract and prohibit me from being present to God and allowing God into my life to be present to me. Losing those earthly attachments sets us free from counting the monetary costs of life which always lead us to feeling poor and under-funded. So we play the lottery to see if it will save us from our financial problems, as if it would free us from our enslavement to things and not make us prisoners of our supposed good fortune.

Shedding those earthly attachments frees us to be present to others. Material things pale by comparison to people. We can be present to others in deep caring ways that go beyond shallow and casual interaction. They allow an intimacy with others which enables empathy and true caring, or shall we call it by that four-letter word which Jesus used all the time?

Shedding those earthly attachments allows us to be present in the moment. This is becoming more and more popular these

days. It is called *being mindful*. Being mindful begins in slowing down and being present to what is going on right now, right in front of you and all around you. It means smelling the flowers, or the coffee, which ever you prefer. It means sensing the beauty of the world around you. It means being profoundly grateful for the blessings you enjoy. It means simplifying and quieting the soul, and focusing the mind, clearing out all that assaults the mind and spirit and making room for the spirit of God to enter in. Mother Teresa once said, *"If your heart is too full of earthly junk, worry and stuff, not even God will be able to get in and help you."* I think a woman who lived what we are talking about today has something fruitful for us to ponder from her experiences.

Count the cost. Consider the alternative.

I am reminded of the old Church Army Hymn that I learned at Camp Washington as kid. They used to sing it every night before we went off to bed:

*"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His Glory and Grace."*

Friends, keep your eyes on the prize. Gaze in the face of Jesus. Let go and let God. And then, the things of earth will grow strangely dim...

What is the cost of being a Christian? Jesus already paid the price with his cross. That cross in the front of our church, that cross hanging around your neck, or on the wall in your home, that cross points to the price of being a Christian. *"Take up your cross and follow me!"* Count the cost. Know the cost. Don't be a slave. Your freedom has already been

purchased at a high price. Always consider it well. Be mindful,
be open, be generous, and be free. It is well worth it! AMEN