



Year IV, The Beauty of Discipleship

Encounter 1, "The Call to Holiness"

Presentation Notes

Most Rev. Richard Smith, Archbishop of Edmonton

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Introduction

Welcome once again to *Nothing More Beautiful*. We are now in Year 4, which we dedicate to exploring the life of discipleship. In the months ahead we shall reflect upon the following dimensions of our life in Christ: the place of the Word of God in our lives; the role of the sacraments; the moral life as a response to God's love, and the eternal destiny held out to us in Jesus. My reflection tonight has as its purpose to set the stage for all of this by discussing the fundamentals of Christian discipleship, which, in its essence, is the response to God's call to holiness.

I begin with a simple summary of what we shall touch upon tonight. A disciple is one who follows a master. Christian discipleship is unique, set apart from all other forms. The Christian disciple is one who follows Jesus Christ. In the immediate Jewish environment of Jesus, it was very common for rabbis to be surrounded by circles of disciples, as it was for philosophers in the ancient Greek world. These disciples could be best described as students, seeking to gain knowledge or skill under the direction of an expert. It was the practice for such a disciple, or student, to seek out the teacher from whom he wanted to learn. Christian discipleship is very different. In the first place, the initiative belongs not to the disciple but to Jesus. It is the Lord who takes the initiative in calling people to follow him.

Second, Christian discipleship is fundamentally a relationship that involves not only the intellect -- as is the case between a student and teacher -- but the entire person. It arises from a personal encounter with Jesus that changes everything; an encounter that awakens one to the truth that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God, who leads us to the Father; an encounter that thus gives birth to a deep inner attachment to him, the surrender of one's entire life. This inner surrender is given concrete expression in total obedience to Jesus, an obedience that involves assuming the pattern of his life as one's own. When we embrace the call to follow Jesus with our entire selves to the life that he alone can give then we are responding to the call to holiness. More specifically, we are responding to the call from God to be made holy, to be sanctified. As Saint Paul says, the will of God is our sanctification (c. *1Thessalonians* 4:3; *Ephesians* 1:4; *Lumen Gentium*, 39).

Let me now develop these points. I shall do so by focusing in turn on each of the three fundamental dimensions of discipleship that I have just mentioned: inner commitment to the person of Jesus; total obedience to him; and accepting as the pattern of one's life the way of the Cross.

I. Commitment to the Person of Jesus

"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1John 4:9-10) Discipleship is a life of response to God who has acted first. The initiative always belongs to God. God took the initiative when he created us; he took the initiative to reach out in mercy after our sin, by speaking of his tenderness, by giving the Commandments and by raising up the great prophets, priests and kings to guide his people; and finally, "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4-5) God took the initiative by sending his Son to reveal his love and enable us to have the fullness of life. The response of the disciple is given to this revelation of God made in Jesus Christ.

How did Jesus communicate the truth of God's love for us and his role in the Father's saving plan? Understanding the answer to this question gives important insight into how we are to respond as disciples.

At every session of *Nothing More Beautiful* we are blessed with the presence of some of our deaf brothers and sisters. My experience with the Deaf community has taught me that communication happens in many ways other than through words. It occurs as well, and indeed most effectively, through signs. Though perhaps not explicitly conscious of it, we choose to communicate through symbolic actions each day: presenting flowers to a loved one as a gesture of affection; giving a hug to someone who is grieving as a visible expression of concern and support; and so on. When I am with the Deaf, I will use sign language in the celebration of Mass. That is their language, and they understand it. Occasionally, some members of the hearing community will be present. They will not necessarily understand the meaning of the signs, and will see only gestures. One time a young teenager told me it looked like I was doing karate all through Mass! For these people, translation by an interpreter is necessary. To have understanding, the sign must be accompanied by words of interpretation.

Think of this interplay between signs and words. Words give interpretation to symbolic actions; but actions also give visible expression to the meaning of words. This is how Jesus revealed both his person and message to the world. Vatican II's document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, makes this very point. It teaches that Revelation is communicated through both the words and the actions of Jesus, and observes that his gestures and speech exist in very close interrelation: his deeds manifest and confirm the essential content of his spoken message; his words bring to light the hidden meaning of his works.

In other words, we could say that Jesus, in fulfillment of his mission as revealer, used sign language. He communicated through symbolic actions, but these gestures were accompanied by words of interpretation, so that their deepest significance would be made clear. Many of these actions were borrowed from the customs of his era, but he often made use of them in such a radically new way that even his contemporaries would need to hear that accompanying word if they were to understand them.

This word of interpretation, of course, is even more necessary for us, who at a distance of more than 2000 years would not even be familiar with the ordinary significance of the symbolic action.

For our purposes this evening, I would like to focus upon the central sign action in the life of Jesus and the words of interpretation that he gives to it. This is the sign of the death of Jesus on the Cross.

Death by crucifixion was the ultimate shame. In the Jewish religious mentality of the day, it was the sign of being cursed by God (cf. *Galatians* 3:13). But by his words of interpretation Jesus radically altered this particular understanding of his death and made known its deepest meaning.

The words recorded by St. Matthew and also by St. Mark are the following: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*, that is, my God my God, why have you forsaken me?" (*Matthew* 27:46; *Mark* 15:34). These words are a citation from Psalm 22 which, although it begins as a cry of despair, ends in expression of unshakable trust in the love of God. His surrender of life on the cross, then, is the culmination of an entire life of unwavering confidence in the love of God. It is revealed as his obedient self-gift to the Father.

Luke records for us the words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (*Luke* 23:34) These words make clear that, through Jesus's acceptance of death on the Cross, the Father's forgiveness comes into the world. Jesus is the suffering upright one who obtains forgiveness, even for those who make him suffer so terribly.

Finally, St. John records Jesus saying: "It is finished." (*John* 19:30) These words indicate that the death of Jesus is the accomplishment of his mission. He is the one sent from heaven to save the world, not to condemn it. This he has done through his willing and obedient death on the cross.

Taken together, these words of the Lord interpret the sign of the cross. They make clear that, by his death, salvation has come to the world; reconciliation with God has been achieved. Jesus is the bringer of salvation, because he is the one through whom the communion of love between the Father and humanity has been restored. His entire life was one continual, unconditional surrender to the will of the Father. This obedience of Jesus, which extended even to death, canceled forever the disobedience of our first parents, and thus restored the human race to the loving embrace of the Father. Through his sign language, Jesus has revealed himself as the unique and universal Saviour of the human race. He alone is the world's light and its hope.

This self-revelation of the Lord calls for a response. The Christian is one who recognizes the truth of Jesus Christ as the gift of the Father, the One who was sent to bring salvation to the world, and gives his or her personal surrender to this truth. Such a surrender is first of all one of worship, in which the soul bows down in adoring submission to the truth of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is rooted in this foundational response to the identity of Jesus Christ and flows from it. This response, too, is given expression in both words and actions, which must explain and complement one another. In words, we profess our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. In action, we follow him as disciples, obedient to his teachings, and manifest by our actions the truth of our words.

Sadly, however, our actions do not always correspond to our words. We do not always practice what we preach. As a result, we give a very confused message. Think, for example, of parents who tell their children not to smoke at the very same instant that they light up a cigarette. Words do not correspond with actions. For the disciple to be authentic, words and actions must fully correspond.

For this authenticity, we need the help of grace. More, we need to be transformed by grace, if we are to live a life of authentic discipleship. This brings me to the second dimension of discipleship: total obedience to Jesus Christ.

II. Obedient Surrender to the Transformative Love Of Jesus Christ

In this section of the presentation I want to focus on the obedient act that precedes all other acts of submission. Here I mean obeying the will of God to act upon us in order to change us, i.e., to sanctify us.

Jesus himself knows that we need to be transformed by his love. Holiness is not something that we attain on our own. Discipleship is not an endeavour we undertake and live by our own efforts. It is by participating in the holiness of Jesus, the all holy one, and by receiving from him the life that he gives, that we are made holy and able to live as his authentic disciples.

Our Lord's awareness of our need for his transforming power was signalled from the very beginning in his encounter with Peter at the Last Supper. Let's listen again to the account in the Gospel of St. John of the washing of the feet:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with the towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. (*John 13: 1-5*)

How did Peter respond to this action? A few verses later, *John 13:8*, we read this:

Peter said to him, you shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, "if I do not wash you, you have no part in me."

Here Jesus is making clear that we respond to his invitation to follow him to life by allowing him to act upon us. Peter would have refused, but Jesus says "you have no part in me," that is to say, you cannot enter into communion with me, unless you allow me to wash you. Jesus draws us into communion with himself. He knows the changes that need to take place in our lives for this to happen. So our surrender to him begins with a "yes" to his desire to wash us by his love and so transform us.

Sometimes people are startled by this idea of "allowing" God to act in our lives. Who are we to "allow" God to do anything? Does God seek our permission? It is helpful in this regard to recall that the mystery of grace is a dialogue of invitation and response between two persons: the triune God and the human being. As such, it is a dialogue between two centres of freedom: the absolute and sovereign freedom of God, and the weak and fragile liberty of the human being. This freedom which we possess is a gift from God, and he respects it absolutely. His love is not imposed upon us. It is offered so that we might freely accept it, and might freely offer our love in return. The free acceptance of the love of God is what is meant by saying that we "allow" God to come to us. We give him permission to transform us, to wash us with his love that we might be changed and thus be drawn into a communion of love and mission with Jesus.

How do we do this? How do we give our "yes" to the transformative power of the Lord in our lives? If we take a look at some principal moments in the relationship between Jesus and Peter, we shall see revealed three essential steps in our obedient surrender to the Lord: allowing Jesus to look at us; allowing Jesus to speak to us; and allowing Jesus to lead us. Let us now briefly consider each of these in turn.

A. Allowing Jesus to look at us

St. John records the first time Peter met Jesus. "Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter)." (*John* 1:42).

In this brief account, Simon is led by his brother Andrew to Jesus. In doing so, Andrew places his brother before the gaze of Jesus: "Jesus looked at him." This gaze of Jesus is one which penetrates to the very core of Simon. The change of name indicates that regardless of how others have looked upon Simon, and regardless even of how Simon may have understood himself, the gaze of Jesus reaches to his true identity, to who he is before God: "You are Peter."

At the centre of each one of us stands an "I" which is unique and unrepeatable. Certainly, as members of the one human race we share characteristics in common with others. Yet even though we possess many similar human features, there is an inviolable uniqueness to every individual.

I found this unusually but powerfully portrayed in the play about St. Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*¹, by Robert Bolt. As the play is drawing near its climax, Bolt puts a line in the mouth of More, who is being pressured by the Duke of Norfolk to offer public acknowledgment of the supremacy of the King over the Church. More states: "I will not give in because I oppose it—I do- not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but / do—!!"

¹ Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: A Play of Sir Thomas More*, Irwin Publishing, Toronto, 1963: 72-73

Then he approaches Norfolk, and while poking and prodding him in the torso, says, "Is there no single sinew in the midst of this that serves no appetite of Norfolk's but is, just, Norfolk? There is! Give that some exercise, my Lord! ... Because as you stand, you will go before your Maker in a very ill condition!"

Beneath all our sinews, our physical structure; beneath all our thoughts and emotions stands an "I" which exists in no one else. When we come before our Maker, when we come, that is, before Jesus, the Son through whom all things were made, and place ourselves before his glance, the gaze of the Lord reaches to this "I." It reaches to the true "I," to who I truly am. Jesus looks at me, and truly sees me.

In consequence, we discover the truth of ourselves. Gazed upon by the all-holy One, we come to recognize our sinfulness, our own need for salvation. Recall that, after Peter had denied the Lord, Jesus turned and looked at him. Peter then remembered the Lord's prediction of denial. (cf. *Luke 22:61*) The Lord's glance brought Peter to a terrible awareness of his sin. At the same time, though, the one who reveals our sinfulness to us is the very one who is the bringer of salvation, the very one who wants us to be saved and who died to manifest this will and bring it to completion. The gaze of Jesus brings us to an awareness of his unconditional love for us and of our absolute need for him.

B. Allowing Jesus to speak to us

Having been brought by the gaze of Jesus to an encounter with him in truth, we open our hearts and ask him to speak to us.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "feed my lambs." The second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (*John 21: 15-19*)

"Do you love me?" This is what matters to the Lord above all else. The goal toward which the Lord is at work when we allow his love to wash over us is to bring us to a communion of love with him. "Do you love me?" He has revealed his great love for us and now he seeks a response of answering love. Do we love him? He is not deterred by any sinfulness of our past. He erases that through forgiveness. Neither is he swayed by any mistakes that we have made, either in ministry or interpersonal relationships, mistakes which may have hurt others or even hurt the Church. The Lord has the power to right any wrong that we have committed. Both his loving gaze and his transformative work move inexorably through our lives, lovingly bypassing our worries and fears, our guilt and sorrows, our masks and pretensions, until they reach that centre of freedom and personhood, which is "I." There the Lord asks the question, "Do you love me?" Do you love me? There he awaits our response. In our "yes" to the Lord, in our answering love, the goal of the divine self-communication is achieved: a communion of love.

This episode from the life of Peter also makes clear that this communion of love is the seedbed of discipleship. Service to the Lord and to his Church flows from the communion of love with him. It does not precede it. "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." This brings us to the third aspect of our obedient response to Christ.

C. Allowing Jesus to lead us

Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." ... From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." (*Matthew 16:15-16, 21-22*)

In this passage, Peter recognizes the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and rejoices in it. But he finds it very difficult to accept the prediction of Jesus which follows. It is immediately clear that his understanding of the Messiah was very different from what the Lord knew he was to do. Like many Jews at that time, Peter thought that the Christ was to be a glorious leader sent from God to liberate the people from the oppression under which they suffered, and who would usher in the heavenly blessings of the end times. He is, therefore, scandalized by the assertion of Jesus that he, the Messiah and Son of the Father, would endure shameful suffering and death.

In rather stern language, Jesus commands Peter, in whom he recognizes the evil influence of Satan, to get behind him. Figuratively speaking, Peter was beginning to walk before Jesus. He was attempting, in other words, to lead the Lord. But Jesus was not to be moved. He knew how God's plan of salvation was to be worked out in his earthly life, and he would be faithful.

Likewise, he knows how the plan of salvation is to be worked out in our own individual lives. Allowing the Lord to look at us, to love us as we truly are, leads us to surrender to his plan, and to abandon our own. We are attentive to his voice, to his call, so that we might understand how he wishes to lead us and to follow.

As Jesus indicated in his prediction of the passion, fidelity to the will of the Father would involve the suffering of the Cross. Elsewhere he teaches that this will also be the case for those who follow him. Recall, for example, his words given by St. Mark: "And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" (*Mark 8:34*) Here the Lord makes clear that following him must be characterized by a willingness and readiness to have our lives patterned on his, a life modelled on the cross. This takes us to the final principal characteristic of Christian discipleship: the taking up of the Cross.

III. The Way of the Cross

I would like to address this third dimension of discipleship by consideration of the sacrament of Baptism. It launches us on the life of faith in Christ and establishes once and for all the defining pattern of Christian discipleship. When you can, read *Romans* 6:3-11. It is perhaps his most important teaching on the meaning of Baptism. St. Paul's basic point is that the life of the Christian requires a definitive break from sin, because of what has taken place in Baptism. His goal in this passage is very practical. By reflection upon what took place at their Baptism, he seeks to motivate Christians to live as they should, i.e. in accordance with the status given to them through this sacrament. The Apostle here is declaring Baptism to be the underlying pattern that determines concrete Christian living. His basic point is that in Baptism we enter into a vital union with Christ. But to be united with Christ is to be united to the very pattern which formed his history, the pattern, that is, of death and resurrection. We are to live as those who have died to sin and have risen to new life in Christ.

I would like to focus briefly on verses 3-5.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

In effect what St. Paul is saying to us is: Do not forget who you have become through your baptism! Live always conscious of your status as son or daughter of the Father, and allow nothing to be part of your life that is not consistent with your status and high calling.

There is an implicit reference here to the ritual of Baptism. Being buried with Christ and rising with Christ refers to the manner in which people were baptized in the early centuries of the Church. Baptism was by immersion, that is to say, stepping into a pool and going under the water, symbolizing burial with Christ or death to sin, and then coming up again, rising with Christ to new life. Today the symbolism is often not as strong. Water is poured over the head of the one being baptized, but the significance is the same: one has died to the old way of life, and risen to a new life in Christ. Through the waters of Baptism, the Holy Spirit is at work to cleanse us of sin and to pour into us the grace we need to live the Christian call to holiness.

I suggest that we make it a regular practice to remind ourselves, as St. Paul is doing here, that we have been baptized. Do we truly realize what that means? Are we living lives that truly accord with the status that is ours as the children of God, called to holiness of life?

Think of the meaning of Baptism that is brought out in the other parts of the ritual as well. Immediately following the baptismal washing, the one baptized is clothed with a white garment. Listen to the words the priest or deacon says as the garment is placed on a newly baptized child: "You have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you, by word and example, bring that dignity

unstained into the everlasting life of heaven." Baptism gives us not only a new life and a new dignity; but also a destiny: everlasting life in heaven.

Then a lit candle is given to the baptized, or to the parents or godparents in the case of a child. "Receive the light of Christ. You have been enlightened by Christ. Walk always as a child of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in your heart. When the Lord comes, may you go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom." No longer do we live in darkness. Our faith in Christ and obedience to his teachings is the light that guides us on our pilgrim faith through life.

What influences us more? The world around us, which in so many ways is at enmity with God, or the truth of who Christ is and who we are in him? Taking up the Cross means a continual death to self, an incessant letting go of the falsehoods, illusions and other attachments that keep us from living authentic Christian lives. Depending upon the depth of attachment, this can be painful, and can involve genuine suffering. But if we die to ourselves in Christ, we rise to joy, to the fullness of life.

Conclusion: Prayer in the Life of a Disciple

I would like to conclude this presentation with some thoughts on prayer. This is very important, because in prayer we find the consolation, strength and hope we need to be authentic followers of the Lord. Allowing the Lord to have his way involves a continual death to self, and this can be very difficult. Allowing the Lord to look at us when we don't even want to look at ourselves, with our weakness and sin, can be something we would rather avoid. We may rather not open our hearts to his word, particularly if we cannot even speak to ourselves about any shortcomings. And when we fall repeatedly along the path to holiness, it can at times take great courage to get back up.

The prayer of a disciple is one of abandonment to the will of God. It is heart speaking to heart, an encounter in which the Lord makes known to us our truth, his love, and the call to follow him along the way of the Cross. It is time spent together as friends, in which Jesus takes the initiative, washes us with his love, and invites us to life, and in which we say in response "thy will be done," *fiat voluntas tua*.

However, often our prayer is not God-focused but self-focused. In the busy-ness of everyday life, replete with its myriad pressures and problems, it is very easy to get bogged down with worry and anxiety. This can get carried over into our prayer to the extent that our time with the Lord becomes simply a rehearsing of the things that trouble us and an attempt to sort them all out. Some teaching from Scripture can help us here.

Christian prayer is prayer in Christ, a sharing in the very prayer of Jesus himself. In *Romans*, chapter 8, St. Paul teaches that, because we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit comes to help us in our weakness, and actually prays within us, "with sighs too deep for words" (8:26). Furthermore, in his letter to the Galatians he teaches that this Spirit is that of the Son, crying out *Abba!* Father! (4:6) In other words, through the working of the Spirit in us, we are united to Christ in his filial prayer. We participate in his prayer to the Father, and from this prayer we draw the faith and strength we need to abandon ourselves to the Father's will.

Consider the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the prayer of the Son crying out to the Father. Throughout the Gospels are numerous references to Jesus taking time, lots of time, to pray to his Father, particularly just prior to decisive moments in his life. The most poignant instance of this is, of course, his prayer just prior to his passion and death.

Scripture tells us that, after the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples went out to a garden on the Mount of Olives called Gethsemane. When one retraces this journey in modern Jerusalem, the Scripture text comes brilliantly alive.

From the location indicated by tradition as the place of the Last Supper, one heads down into the Kidron Valley towards the garden. What comes into view is the valley's east side, which is the Mount of Olives. On the other side of the Mount is Bethany and the road to Jericho. The garden of Gethsemane is where Jesus and his disciples would often meet (cf. *John 18:2*). The point is that by the night of the Last Supper, Jesus was well aware of the danger he faced, thus making Gethsemane the place of decision. His enemies would approach from the city, and a fast 10-minute walk would have taken him to the top of the Mount of Olives from where he could have escaped into the vast expanse of desert before him. The question, of course, was agonizing, and the weight of it literally pushed him to the ground. Only in prayer was the answer found. It was his filial prayer, crying out to *Abba*, that word which combines at once an awesome reverence and tender intimacy. It was only when Jesus had poured himself into this utterance, this word, crying out with everything that he had, that he was able to stand up. He did not walk up that hill, but turned his face once more toward Jerusalem, as he had throughout the final stages of his ministry, and met his enemies, entirely abandoned to the will of the Father.

When we receive the Holy Spirit, it is this Spirit of the Son, crying out *Abba!* Father!, that we receive. In this way does the Spirit enable us to respond to the invitation of Jesus to call his Father our Father, to come before him as his children, to trust, even in the darkest moments, in the sufficiency of his provision for us, and to abandon ourselves to his will.

It is truly beautiful to be a Christian. May we not cease to thank the Father for the precious gift of life in his Son. Let us ask him this evening, and at all times, to transform us anew as authentic disciples and increase within us the grace of holiness.