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Prudence and Diligence in the Christian Mission

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Prudence and Diligence in the Christian Mission

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Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 30, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

1 Kg 19:16-21; Ps 16; Gal 5:1, 13-18; Lk 9:51-62

PRUDENCE AND DILIGENCE IN THE CHRISTIAN MISSION

Lawrence E. Frizzell

We live in a fast-paced society and the pressures often cause disruptions that affect our personal lives and family. In a discussion concerning "burn-out" among the clergy, a young priest who had been a lawyer remarked: "Most of us have yet to light the flame!" That brought a hearty laugh, because we realized that he had been in both worlds and was glad to be rid of the competitive thrust that dehumanizes so many.

Christians are not expected to risk health and emotional stability for the sake of profits and gains or goals and objectives. We should not attempt to measure success, but leave the results of our work to divine grace and mercy. Yet we *are* challenged to make a resolute commitment, asking daily for the strength to be faithful servants in good times and bad. As Rabbi Tarfon (second century A.D.) stated: "Life is short but the task is great; the workmen are lazy but the reward is great and the Master is insistent. You are not called to complete the work yet you are not free to evade it" (*Mishnah Abot 2:20-21*).

The Gospel according to St. Luke shows that the public ministry of Jesus develops as a pilgrimage toward Jerusalem, where his Paschal Mystery would culminate in the ascension. Pilgrims carried no personal resources but depended on the hospitality of people along the way. However, Jesus and his disciples were not welcome in a Samaritan village. Fiery tempered, the sons of Zebedee asked Jesus to act like Elijah, who called fire from heaven upon those who threatened him (2 Kg 1:9-15). However, this would violate the spirit of the Gospel. Had they not learned "to turn the other cheek" (Lk 6:29)? Mild and patient as Jesus is, he is very demanding of his disciples. He declares the challenge of following him in very blunt terms. An enthusiastic man is told that the Son of Man is a vagrant, depending on others for food and lodging. Nor does dedication to the Kingdom allow for filial ties to take precedence over the call of Jesus. The obligation to bury one's parents is indeed an important act of devotion but it can be fulfilled by others. Did Jesus know that the man had a brother? The disciple must be ready for a life of sacrifice, following Jesus without imposing any conditions on the response.

A third person volunteers but wants to take leave of his parents, a perfectly reasonable request since his disappearance would cause great anguish. Yet they might try to dissuade the man from his goal. The reply of Jesus again seems enormously demanding. "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks back to what is left behind is fit for the Kingdom of God" (Lk 9:62).

As in Nain, where Jesus raised the widow's son (Lk 7:11-17), the Gospel draws attention to the work of Elijah, the great prophet like Moses (see Dt 18:15, 18) in the northern Kingdom. After the experience of renewing the Covenant with God at Mount Horeb (Sinai), Elijah was told to

choose and anoint Elisha as his disciple and successor. Elijah dramatically threw his prophet's cloak over the young man as he plowed a field. Elisha recognized the meaning of the gesture and asked to bid farewell to his parents before taking up his new vocation. Like the Galilean fisherman, Zebedee, Elisha's parents had ample hired help, so he was not worried about their wellbeing. His commitment to Elijah was irrevocable, indicated by the use of the plow as firewood.

Drawing on familiar experiences of Galileans, Jesus often described the Kingdom of God in terms of farming. Indeed, straight furrows in a field are a silent witness to the plowman's care. This kind of dedication and more should be given to the task of preparing the world for God's Word! Perhaps the sense of urgency instilled by Jesus is best understood within the context of pilgrimage, a journey to promote the Kingdom as the community progresses towards Jerusalem. Some were challenged by Jesus to live the ideals of family life and commitment to a career in a new way; others were called, not only to keep the commandments with a new insight into love of God and neighbor, but to embark on the way of the cross with Jesus. Indeed, one should conserve emotional energies and health prudently to avoid "burn-out", because in our maturing relationship with God we will have much more to offer his people in the future. Yet we must recall Jesus' demand of all his disciples: They must deny self and take up their cross *daily* to follow him (See Luke 9:23).