23ᵗʰ Sunday in Ordinary Time - C
Ben Frie SJ

A church building like ours requires good management. It's about money, of course, but also about architectural approval by the Monumentenwacht, the Dutch watchdog for historic buildings. Various authorities are looking over our shoulders to see if we are maintaining the building in the right way, otherwise we will miss out on the subsidies that are due to us. Well, we are in the right place: this location is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site and that even gives us an edge over other churches.

If the board does its job well, it makes policy for the whole church business. Will we be able to continue to fulfill our mission in this downtown area? And then the question is not only whether we will keep the towers standing, but also whether we will continue to take good care of our religion. Does our confession fit with our building? Can we continue to afford this privileged position? Do we have valid reasons for existence?

If you want to follow Jesus, you need to get a good sense of what that might mean for you. A life decision, a life choice requires planning. Can I live up to it, can I handle it? Can I live like that, can I afford it? Can I give it all away? Jesus captivates people with his vision for life, but at the same time makes it clear to them that it is not so easy to follow him. His mission is demanding.

The statement about hating family, relatives and even one's own life cannot be understood literally. Jesus instructs us to love our enemies, and then the command to hate one's own blood would be quite contradictory. That there are tensions and maybe even hatreds in every family is something else, at least not something Jesus wants to encourage. We are to love our enemies as well as our family. What if your family is keeping you away from the way of Jesus? Or if those around you dislike the fact that you are religious? This much is clear: choosing the way of Jesus can sometimes lead to difficult decisions. What are you willing to do, but also: will others accept what you choose, will they give you space, can they?

Choosing for Jesus means in the language of Jesus' culture: to hate all other people. To reject everything that is different from Jesus. He knows what He is asking: consider first, if you want to choose Me, whether you can meet the requirements. Otherwise, you could claim to be a Christian in public, while your way of life contradicts that. Then you would make a figure, because you would not be credible. And other Christians are not happy about it either. You undermine the devotion of the others.

The first reading gives us a few direct thoughts on the doubtfulness of our calculations. 'The thoughts of starvelings are uncertain,' it says. 'We hardly understand the things of the world - how then would we understand the heavenly?' So, it may very well be that we overestimate ourselves, let alone that we would fully know what God wants from us! That is our urgent request to God, that He reveals what He expects from us. After all, if we have to look for it ourselves, success is not guaranteed. Our self-interest is bothering us; unnoticed, it is more important to us than the interest of God. "Who can know Your will," it says in the biblical prayer for wisdom, "if You do not give him insight?"

Can you detach yourself from all that you own? We have become accustomed in our culture of prosperity and well-being to the obviousness of our possessions. Now that many things are coming under pressure, a lot of people have been forced to detach themselves from possessions, even the little they had. You can no longer simply dispose of everything as you used to. Not to mention the experience of refugees and asylum seekers, who no longer have anything at all.

We hardly understand the things of the world, so how can we understand what God wants with it? Those who turn to God with simplicity of heart with all the uncertainty of existence can begin to understand that God sees the world differently. He showed us the Son of Man, who gave everything He had, yes, His own life. Could we do that?