

Today's scriptures really challenge us, don't they?

The readings from Wisdom and the Psalm set us up to be frustrated by the Gospel:

- **Wisdom says we can't understand what the Lord intends**
- **The Psalm piles it on, with the assertion that not only can we not understand God's intent, but that even if we do, by the Holy Spirit, understand partially, God's timing is not at all like ours, since for God 1000 years is like yesterday.**

Paul sends a runaway slave back to his owner, and asks the owner, Philemon, to treat the slave, Onesimus as a brother. That's a hard pill for either slave or slave owner to swallow.

And Jesus? He's the worst. This is one of his "hard sayings."

- **Jesus says we must hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even our own lives.**
- **He tells us to carry our own cross, which we'd only do if we were on the way to our crucifixion.**
- **He tells us to renounce all our possessions.**

Seriously? Any one of these is... ridiculous. And yet that's what Jesus says.

What are we supposed to do, then? How do we swallow this pill?

How do we take refuge in the Lord, and shout for joy and gladness, and how is that even an appropriate response, given the word proclaimed to us today?

Let's tackle the gospel first. If we can't get that right, how can it be the lense through which we understand the other readings?

"If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

This is a very hard saying. Well, except perhaps for teenagers, who can't stand their parents, hate their siblings, and hate their lives... for them, it's easy. But for the rest of us, how can we hate our own family when we are supposed to love our enemies, and... too often those are the same people.

St Gregory the Great, whose feast day we celebrated this past Tuesday, says we hate ourselves when we discipline our flesh: "we indulge not carnal desires, subdue its appetites, and wrestle against its pleasures. By hating what is less in us, we love what is greater and spiritual." This is how we should hate our families.

We should hate their sin, their addictions, their hardness of heart, their fear, their insecurity, their baggage. We should hate those, and love what is better in them. We should pray for their freedom from those things that burden them and hold them back from God's best. We should support their efforts to wrestle with sin, and to grasp those things that bring them close to God.

Sometimes, this means we have to withhold approval. It may mean we can't "like" someone's relationship status, and have to deal with the social media drama that brings. Our persistence may make us sound a little naggy. Do we love their soul, or do we love the peace of avoiding difficult conversations? On the other

hand, sometimes this means we give approval to baby steps in the right direction, even if we're frustrated by just how "baby" those steps are. Jesus is calling us to hate what is keeping ourselves, and our families from his love. In doing so, we are loving what brings us most deeply into his love.

So Jesus is talking about hate, but he really means love, right? Or, is that a stretch?

In Genesis, we read about Jacob, to whom God later gave the name Israel. He worked 7 years for Rachel, but got tricked into marrying her sister Leah. He then worked another 7 years for Rachel. It says that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and when God saw that Leah *was hated*, God blessed her.

Also, in Matthew's account of this teaching, Jesus says

He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me.

I think it's fair to say that Jesus is, in fact, using hyperbole here, and that the children of Israel to whom he spoke would have understood this.

He's saying that by comparison to our love for him, all other love might as well be hate.

What about carrying our cross? One does not simply walk about carrying a cross. The cross is a sign of death, and of torture.

One way we carry our cross is to “memento mori,” to, “remember death.” Scripture tells us that Paul died daily, and despised death. Saint Basil tells us

“By bearing the cross [Saint Paul] also announced the death of his Lord, saying *the world is crucified to me, and I to the world*, which we also anticipate in our very baptism, in which our old man is crucified...”

In baptism, we die to death, and rise to a new life. Carrying our cross means to keep this death in the forefront of our mind.

The cross was not only a sign of death, but also an instrument of torture and suffering. Some suffering comes into every life. We wrestle with illness, with financial difficulties, with social conflict, with family disharmony, with misunderstanding, with hatred. Other sufferings, like fasting, we take on intentionally for the sake of our spiritual health. How do we bear these sufferings?

The abuelitas tell us to “offer up” our sufferings. St Gregory the Great has some wise words on this, also.

"In two ways we bear our Lord's cross, either when by abstinence we afflict our bodies, or when through compassion to our neighbor we think all his necessities our own."

Sadly, we've mostly abandoned the tradition of fasting or abstaining in an effort to participate in God's work in us, and also abandoned the tradition of offering our sufferings for another's benefit, or doing without so another can have what they need.

When my older sons, Bryce Meurer, and I had a long hiking trek in Philmont, I learned that St Gregory and the abuelitas are, in fact, wise.

It was only the second full day of our trek, and I thought I might die. I was ill prepared, overweight, and exhausted. I struggled up every hill, and nearly tripped on every pebble in my path. For some reason, I decided to pray the rosary. Perhaps because I was sure this was the moment of my death. I didn't feel much better, but I didn't die, and at least I had a distraction from my misery.

On the next leg of our journey, for some reason, I decided to try and make some good use of my "suffering," and I offered up my misery on behalf of another. As I prayed and meditated upon those mysteries, I started to feel better. I discovered I was no longer miserable. In fact, my overloaded pack seemed suddenly lighter. Before I knew it, I was skipping down the trail like a child, full of boundless energy.

I'm not guaranteeing that every time we offer up our sufferings for another, our burdens will become lighter. I do know, however, that Christ bore his cross for us out of love. I do know that, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross. I do know that if we remember we are dead to sin through baptism, and live with love and compassion, we will truly be "little Christs", Christians, bearing our cross out of love.

This third hard saying of Jesus is that we must renounce all our possessions if we want to be his disciples.

What does it mean to renounce or forsake everything we have?

We know there are some called to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus. Is that how we're all called? Is Jesus presenting some Socialist ideal like the very early church, who had all things in common, and sold whatever they had to be shared among the church? Are we doomed to hell if we don't?

St Bede says no. He says there is a difference between renouncing all things and leaving all things. He says a few perfect people are called to leave everything, but it is for all the faithful to renounce all things. That is, to renounce love of them, so we hold the things of this world, but are not held by them.

I hope the theme is clear now. Jesus is calling us to a well ordered love.

He is calling us to love God first, and to love God so much that all other love is hate, by comparison.

The readings from Wisdom, and the Psalm, and Saint Paul's letter to Philemon both speak of trust, which is the result of love.

We cannot conceive what the Lord intends, but we trust that God intends love.

We cannot anticipate God's timing, but we know it is good, and that God's kindness will lead us to shout for joy and gladness.

Paul wants Onesimus to stay, and can't force Philemon to do the right thing, but he trusts God, and sees that God has a bigger plan for Onesimus, and Philemon.

Trust *in* God means we trust *that* God intends love, and we trust *when* God will choose to manifest his loving kindness to us.

We can become frustrated or disappointed when things don't work out for us the way we think they should and when they should. We certainly don't want to wait.

But waiting is good for us.

When we were preparing to enter full communion with the Catholic Church, Sundays were torture. We always joined the rosary before mass. When we got to the Hail, Holy Queen, and spoke of ourselves as poor banished children of Eve, we truly felt it. We were poor banished children, unable to receive the Eucharist. Every Sunday, our desire to receive grew. At the time, I hated the wait. Now, I am so thankful for that waiting that created a yearning in our hearts to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. Every time I pray that prayer, my yearning is refreshed.

Often, when God asks us to wait, it is so we can delight more perfectly in the goodness God has in store for us.

God's love is perfect, and God's timing is impeccable.

In the collect prayer at the beginning of mass, we prayed for freedom. True freedom is to be free from disordered love. True freedom is to place our trust in the Lord's timing, confident in God's loving kindness.

May our love and our trust grow, and our hearts sing along with today's Communion antiphon:

Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God...