**June 25, 2021**

**Counting the Cost**

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down. first and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish — Luk 14:28-30

**Life Is a Building**

It is notable that in this little parable, and in the one which directly follows it (Luk 14:31), which deal with the great endeavors of the human soul, our Lord brings in the figure of the builder, and of a king making war upon another king. Christ always took human life at its best and kingliest, and even His illustrations have a royal touch. But the point to note is that Christ compared life to building. Life was like architecture or like war. Building and battling—these are the Master's figures; and I do not think the world has ever bettered them. There are rare souls that seem to grow, not build. And it may be some of us have known one saint—our mother perhaps—who bore no marks of conflict anywhere, and seemed to have reached the highest without a struggle. But for most of us it is the other way. Effort on effort, failure after failure, we have to forge and hammer ourselves towards what is honorable. And there are days when we seem to be building up a prison-house, until God in His mercy shatters that to fragments. Just note, then, that it is in a little parable of building that our Savior teaches us to count the cost.

**Christ's Yoke Is Easy**

Now, anyone who has read much in religious literature must have been struck by a kind of contradiction in it. He must have been arrested by two opposite conceptions of what religion really demands. I read some sermons, or I listen to some preaching, and religion seems exquisitely sweet and easy. I thought there was a cross in our religion, but when I read some of our current literature—if there be a cross it is so wreathed with honeysuckle that a poor soul can stumble past it easily. The valley of the shadow seems to have grown antiquated; we are to walk on the delectable mountains all the way. Mark you, we never can insist enough on the true joy of the religious life. We never can forget that to the heavy-laden, Christ said, and says forever, "My yoke is easy." But that is so interpreted sometimes, and the harder and sterner sayings are so evaded, that religion seems to walk in silver slippers.

**Christ Promises a Cross**

But when I turn to another class of teachers—and some of the greatest of every age are in it—what impresses me is not the ease of things, but the depth and difficulty of religion. The gate is narrow; the way is strait and mountainous; the cross is heavy, and the flesh cries out against it. Read Dr. Newman's sermons to see that view of the religious life expressed in matchless English. That, then, is the seeming contradiction. These are the two opposite conceptions. The one says, "If I come to Jesus, happy shall I be." The other says, "If I find Him, if I follow, what His guerdon here? Many a sorrow, many a labor, many a tear."

Well, in our text there can be little question that our Lord leans to the latter of these views. It is a great thing to be an earnest Christian, it is a high calling to be a knight of that round table; let a man, says Jesus, deliberately sit down and count the cost, lest the fair fame of it be smirched and sullied by him. Nothing impresses us more in Jesus Christ than His insistence on quality, not quantity. He never hesitated to set the standard high, even though men should be offended at Him. It is better to be served by twenty loyal hearts, than by half a hundred undisciplined adventurers. Think it all out, says Christ. Sit down, count up the cost, find what it comes to. Rash promising is certain to make shipwreck. I want you to be still, and know that I am God.

Now I think it immensely increases our reverence for Jesus to find Him dealing thus with human souls. He never veils the hardship of His calling, He is so absolutely certain of its glory. When Drake and the gallant captains of Queen Elizabeth's time went out into the streets of Plymouth to get sailors, they told them quite frankly of the storms of the Pacific, and of the reefs in it, and of the fevers of Panama. They honored their brave Devonshire comrades far too much to get them to sign on under any false pretences. But then there was the Spanish gold and treasure, and the glory of it, and all England to ring with it. And the men counted the cost and signed for that daring service, in the spacious times of great Elizabeth. And I honor our Captain for dealing with men like that—that press-gang is an un-Christlike instrument. Christ says: You are a free man; count the cost. Life is before you: choose whom you will serve. I offer you a cross, also a crown. I offer you struggle, but there shall be victory. You shall be lonely, yet lo, I am with you always. You shall be restless, yet I will give you rest. Was there ever a leader so frank, so open, so brave, as the Master who is claiming you tonight?

**Counting the Cost**

And it is just here that the service of our Lord stands at opposite poles from the service of sin. For the one thing that sin can never do is to say to a man, "Sit down and count the cost of it." Do you think that tonight's drunkard ever counted the cost when men called him such splendid company twenty years ago? Do you think that the man who has tried for, and missed, life's prizes counted the cost when he was sowing his wild oats? Sin is too subtle, too sweet, too masterfully urgent, to give a man time for that arithmetic. "Evil is wrought by want of thought, as well as want of heart." If that young student will only deliberately count the cost; if he will only remember he is in the grip of law that no repentance ever can annul; if he will think that as he sows, so will he reap, I think he will shake himself and say, "Get thee behind me, Satan." It is true that you cannot put old heads upon young shoulders. But don't we begin counting when we are little children? And half the battle of a man's life is won when he sits down and counts the cost. Sin will keep a man from that, by hook or crook. But "come and let us reason together," saith the Lord.

Of course we must distinguish this wise deliberation from a merely calculating and cowardly prudence. It is often the man who has counted the cost most earnestly, who shows a kind of splendid imprudence to the world. I mean that what the world calls prudence is very often a somewhat shallow thing. It does not run its roots into the deeps; it is really a kindlier name for selfishness. And the man who has dwelt alone with the great things, and who has been touched by the hand of the Eternal, is not likely in that sense to be worldly wise. I dare say that everybody thought John Knox imprudent when he insisted on preaching in St. Andrews, though the Archbishop had warned him he would slay him. I dare say everybody thought Martin Luther imprudent, when he said he would go to the Diet though every tile on the housetops were a devil. But Knox and Luther had been alone with God; it was deliberate action, and not reckless folly. They had counted the cost for Scotland and for Christendom.

The fact is, that in all the highest courage there is the element of quiet calculation. The truest heroism always counts the cost. The bravery of passion is not a shining virtue. I think that a very ordinary man could storm a rampart, if he were a soldier. They tell us there is a wild forgetfulness of self in that last rush that would fire the blood and thrill the most timid. The test of courage is the long night march, under the fire of invisible guns; it is the sentry duty in the darkness, when the shadows and silence might shatter the strongest nerve: I think that the man who deliberately faces that, who goes through it quietly because it is his duty, is just as worthy of the Victoria Cross as the man who has won it in some more splendid moment. No man, said one of Oliver Cromwell, no man was a better judge than Oliver of what might be achieved by daring. Yet the true heroism of that noble soul was not the heroism of the rash adventurer. He never let texts do duty for tactics, says Mr. Morley. I always admired the answer of that man who was going forward with a comrade to some dangerous duty. And his comrade looked at him, and saw that his cheek was blanched. And he laughed and said, "I believe you are afraid." And the other, looking straight forward, said, "Yes, I am afraid, and if you were half as afraid as I am, you would go home." Do not forget, then, that when Jesus says, "Count the cost," He is really sounding the note of the heroic. He does not want anyone on false pretences. He will not issue any lying prospectus. He comes to you and says, you are a thinking man, with powers that it will take eternity to ripen. Look life in the face. Look death in the face. Sum it all up, measure the value of things. And if you do that quietly and earnestly, with sincere prayer to God to enlighten you, My claims, Christ means, shall so tower above all others, that I shall have your heart and your service from that hour.

**The Secret of Calm Persistence**

I have been struck, too, in studying the Scriptures, to note how the great men there learned to count the cost. They were not suddenly dragged into the service. There was no unthinking and unreasoning excitement. God gave to everyone of them a time of silence before their high endeavor. It was as if He laid His hand upon them and said, "My child, go apart for a little, and count the cost." Moses was forty days alone with God. Elijah was in the wilderness alone. Paul, touched by the finger of the Lord whom he had persecuted, took counsel of no flesh, but departed into the loneliness of Arabia. Moses, Elijah, Paul—yes, even Simon Peter going out into the night—were learning the deep lesson of our parable. And whenever I read of the temptations of Jesus, and of how the Spirit of God drove Him apart, and how Satan came and showed Him all the kingdoms, and taught Him a less costly way to sovereignty than by the sweat of Gethsemane and the water and blood of Calvary—whenever I read that and recall how He stood fast, I feel that our Savior had counted the cost Himself. We shall never understand the calm persistence of the glorious company of martyrs and of saints till we go back to that quiet hour at the beginning when they faced every difficulty, weighed every cross, forecast the future, looked at life whole, and then, having counted the cost like reasonable men, took up their stand upon the side of God. A blind acceptance may be justifiable sometimes. But the great hearts were never led that way.

Now I want you to join that reasonable company. I do not know that that is popular doctrine, but I want to get the young men back to the Church of Christ again, and I am willing to risk unpopularity for that. "Come, let us reason together," saith the Lord. "Sit down and count the cost," says Jesus Christ. I do not ask any man to become a Christian blindly. It is the most reasonable act in the whole world. For the sake of a saved life and of a rich eternity you ought to make that reckoning immediately.