

## I. Introduction

Today we celebrate the Memorial of St Jerome: a particularly important figure for the Church for his scholarly life and work. We are told that St Jerome was an avid student, a thorough scholar, a prodigious letter-writer and a consultant to monk, bishop and pope. Of him, St. Augustine said, “What Jerome is ignorant of, no mortal has ever known.” He translated the early Bible into Latin [the Vulgate]; he also wrote the commentaries, which many of us still use today as a source of scriptural inspiration for our homilies. On this day, how not to remember to pray for our own languages and scripture scholars, Sr. Ingrid/Fr. Joachim/Kombi and all the Biblical scholars that are helping our students to enter deeply into the knowledge of the Bible! I would like personally to offer this Eucharist for an amazing lady: a young woman on our staff who is leaving to pursue some other dreams. That God may be favorable to her and make all her dreams come true. By the same token, Welcome Terry and thank you for joining our work at Hekima IPSIR.

## II. The Gospel:

As Jesus and his disciples were proceeding on their journey, someone said to him, “*I will follow you wherever you go.*” Jesus answered him, “*Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.*” [= the state of felicity] And to another he said, “*Follow me.*” But he replied, “Lord, let me go first and bury my father.” But he answered him, “*Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.*” And another said, “*I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home.*” Jesus answered him, “*No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the Kingdom of God.*”

## On following Christ!

### 1. A Question that Despairs an Answer!

*“The child left with the angel, and the **dog followed behind.** This sentence is in the Bible. It’s from the Book of Tobit. The Bible is a book composed of many books, and in each one of them, there are many sentences, and in each one of these sentences, there are many stars, olive trees, fountains, little asses and fig trees, grain fields and fish – and the wind, everywhere the wind, the mauve of the evening wind and the pink of morning breeze, the black of great storms. Today’s books are made of paper, yesterday’s books were made of skin. The Bible is the only book made of air. It is a flood of ink and wind, a mad book, adrift in its meaning, as lost in its pages as the wind on supermarkets parking lots, in women’s hair, in the eyes of children. It takes flight on the spot, scatters the sand of its phrases through our fingers. We take the wind in our hands and very quickly we stop. As at the beginning of a love Affair, we say: “I will stop here, I have found everything, I will stop here with the first smile, the first meeting, the first chance. *The child left with the angel, and the dog followed behind.*”*

This how Christian Bobin introduces his biography of Saint Francis of Assisi. In French called, *Le Tres Bas!* The lowliest. He says that this “sentence suits Francis of Assisi marvelously well.” And he says again that Francis is that dog. “We know very little of him and that is for the best. What we know about people keeps us from knowing them...”

He says again that “very few genuine words are exchanged in a day, really very few. Perhaps we only fall in love in order finally to begin to speak.”

But Francis, the dog, is a question that despairs an answer. It bangs itself like a fly banging against a pane of glass until it finds the open air of an answer... Where do I come from I who was not always here?

Today, we may have shortcuts to the answer: biology, genetics, history, sociology, you name it! It is science. And it tells us the truth about origins and ends. But, it tells us nothing about the deep longing, the question that despairs an answer: LOVE.

I hear the same despair in the voices of today's gospel. I hear the same longing. I hear names not pronounced: voices – just voices. Whose voices are they?

The voice of the one who wants to follow Jesus and the voices of the other ones who simply are curious to listen to the master's silence! And in silence, Jesus is in procession toward Jerusalem...

Two incidents had happened. One: we know that at the border between Galilee and Samaria, the Samaritans refused him to go through their territory. That's no fun! For there is 140 Kms to be covered on foot between Capernaum and Jerusalem and no one is interested in adding another 15 Kms by taking the detour. Samaria, for that matter, would make a good shortcut. But that's not the point.

If you remember, he once was allowed to sojourn among them. Jesus took trouble talking to this woman he encountered at Jacob's well; and subsequently, he received an invitation to enter Samaria. In the end, the overjoyed people of Samaria confessed: *"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."* John is the one who tells that story (Jn 4:42).

Now, they believe there isn't much they can draw from him. They simply bar him the way! John and James were angered that they asked Jesus for permission to destroy this crap city with fire. No way! Said Jesus. There is no way you can do that. The temptation to use and abuse power. It is only last week, if you still remember that Francis told us of the mission of the 12 to go from village to village. At their return, Jesus took them aside for some rest – and the feeding of the 5,000 men took place. Then Peter confesses the Divine Sonship of

Jesus. All of this is just too good! And it's such a wonderful thing to be followers of a Victorious Messiah!

2.

**So what's today's gospel about? Who is it meant for? How is it still a gospel today?**

Of course it's about following Jesus to Jerusalem.

(1) Try to picture Jesus followed by the 12 on his journey. But they too, like the Samaritan, could be sanguine, at times overly optimistic. Remember the moment he decided to go to Bethany where his friend Lazarus had just died? Thomas was spontaneous when he "said to his fellow disciples: Let us also go, so that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). And what about Peter when he said during Jesus at the last Supper, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away"? (Mt 26:33). Like the Samaritan people who once welcomed him, the disciples also could be versatile. Jesus knew this and had to warn them.

(2) It is while irrevocably on his way to Jerusalem, he heard this voice shouting: "***I will follow you wherever you go.***" He stops. He slowly turns around to see who was it that offered his candidacy to discipleship. This was one of those ***people enthused*** by Jesus' preaching. A fanatic. A lunatic ready to give up everything he'd know so far just to be with this "idealist"? Unlike the ***fox*** that have dens, and the birds that have nests, the son of man has nowhere to rest his head!

Then Jesus looked around and scrutinized other faces to see if there was another one who wanted to give out generously. As soon as he saw a "desperate" face, he summoned him: "follow me!" Who would answer a yes without having a second thought to such an injunction? Anyone in their right mind, with a perfect orderly life, not searching for anything in particular to disrupt their comfortable routine, anyone in this crowd made of curious follow who longed simply to hear few

new words would turn down such a call. Follow you??? Where to????  
To make homelessness a profession? A wanderer without borders  
like you?

Our second guy was a polite. He simply and diplomatically answered:  
***“Thank you, but not now!”*** At least, not until my parents are dead!  
But I can always come back. For now, I have got responsibilities and  
I have to live up to them... In response, Jesus has a word of wisdom:  
Live from the abundance of life and do not let fear of death regulate  
your life, or dictate your behavior

In the third dialogue that preemptively seeks to preclude Jesus' call,  
the man offers: ***“I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say  
farewell to those at my home.”*** Hum! Why did he feel compelled to  
answer a question that was yet to be asked? Did Jesus look intensely  
at him that he felt he had to say something? Have you ever found  
yourself in such a situation where the gaze of the other compels you  
to behave in a certain way? In reply, Jesus says, there is no half-half  
commitment for what is right. The gospel is a radical business!

3.

Christian Bobin is right to say that the Bible is a weird book. You  
find in it almost everything. You find not only a dog following its two  
masters: the child and the angel, the laughter and the silence, the  
playfulness and the grace, but also, besides the winds and olive trees,  
the fig trees and lambs, the sands and deserts, oceans and the  
whales... you also find the birds and their nests, the foxes and their  
dens, and plows and their asses, and God knows what!

As a child, I used to like stories about foxes like in ***The Little  
Prince***. It's a beautiful metaphor about being patient with one's  
desires. You remember the story I am sure...

"Who are you? You are very pretty to look at." "I am a fox,"  
the fox said. [Then] the little prince proposed, "Come and play

with me. I am so unhappy." "I cannot play with you," the fox said. "I am not tamed." And it goes on and on...

The metaphor of the “fox” in today’s gospel, however, applies to the shrewd and to those who dispossess the “anawims” of their rights to accrue their own power.

When Jesus calls Herod “Fox” in Luke 13:32-33, I immediately knew it was not a compliment. Herod had everything when he put innocent children to death. Jesus was only a child. Herod the son killed John the Baptist and was now trying to kill Jesus. You can choose to follow Herod for his “dens” and “nests.” That’s all right.

But there is a price to pay in choosing to follow Jesus. For Jesus, it is all about telling the truth. No sugarcoating! He is resolutely and irrevocably on his way to Jerusalem. This has meaning and consequences for those who want to journey with him...

Discipleship is not about all the *tra la la* of bread miracles, water changed into wine at Cana, or the abuse of power and authority given to the disciples for the sake of the Kingdom.

So if you still want to follow me, says Jesus, know that my journey ends in that rebel city that kills its own prophets (13:33). Moderate your enthusiasm; there will be hardships and trials – but I promise I shall always be there with you!

## **Conclusion**

I remember an anecdote dating back to my years as a novice Jesuit. This was in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide. On a sunny beautiful day, as we travelled through the hills and the fields, I remember the *bonne humeur* of the novices singing to the Jean-Claude Gianadda’s music that was playing in our minivan. We meandered on the road from Cyanguu and pull to the local hospital in Naymasheke, our first stopover. Our tour guide, a Rwanda nurse could only speak Kinyarwanda. One of ours was translating for the rest of us. Then,

suddenly, we just saw him so upset that he refused he wouldn't continue with the translation. We had just encountered a group of female nurses who asked their colleague about the group that we represented. She replied in Kinyarwanda: "**a'bita b'Imana**". We would learn later that this literary meant *those who've received a call from God's!* Yet, our translator was upset because of the duplicitous meaning of this apparently innocent and flattering "title." In the Rwandan culture, at least according to some explanation we received later one, the expression was used as a euphemism to refer to those who had passed away, the deceased, the dead and, here, by extension, it applied to us for we were useless men who represented no interest to these beautiful girls... Apparently, Jesus' Call can also mean death to the world...

Discipleship is not a life of a senior bureaucrat in the government with a big paycheck or a CEO's wage with benefits and bonuses. My Kingdom is not about gold and wealth, power and self-interest. To quote Saint Paul to the Romans, "For the Kingdom of God is not a question of eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (14:17).

I am sure we all followed with enthusiasm and interest the recent visit of Pope Francis to the US where he had lunch with the homeless; stopped his car to embrace a child of immigrants; went to address the powerful; and every expression he adopted to show how Jesus is closer to the "real" people, not only to those well-thinking people who go to Church every Sunday.