

The Cost of Discipleship - Luke14:25-33 on Sunday 4th. September 2016

My first inclination on reading this morning's Gospel was, "Can I preach on the Old Testament reading or the epistle, which is Paul's letter to Philemon?" However, as Christians we cannot just miss out those words of Jesus that are, at first sight, indigestible, like we might not choose those dishes we don't like at a buffet. Jesus turns to those who are now travelling with him, a large crowd by now, and stops them in their tracks. He knows that the majority are hoping to see more miracles, or get free food or listen to his wonderful stories. But there's more to being a disciple of Jesus than that. And Jesus doesn't pull his punches - he gives it to them straight. It's all or nothing. You are either in or out.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

I like the Message's interpretation:

"Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers and sisters - yes, even one's self - can't be my disciple."

Whichever way you put it, it is hardly the way to win friends and influence people. I mean it's not the best manifesto for political victory. I can imagine some members of that large crowd walking away thinking "That is certainly not for me. Thank you very much."

So what can we take out of these words of Jesus? What is the message of these words today for us? Do they ring any bells? Jesus is using hyperbole, exaggeration to make a most important point. Following him will not be easy and may even have catastrophic effects. The decision to become a disciple of Jesus must be given very careful consideration. "Hate" is the disturbing word. It can be seen as prophetic exaggeration for the uncompromising loyalty required towards Jesus and the true family of disciples. In the Greek interpretation it means "love less than". Jesus is not denying the importance of close family, nor the propriety of living in close harmony with them. He is saying however that when there is an important task to be done for the sake of the kingdom, one's primary allegiance is your relationship with God. What is more there may be a need to carry one's own cross, giving up self-interest and competing loyalties in order to be more Christ-like. It appears that Jesus' command to follow him is both a gift and a demand. Jesus wants no lukewarm disciples.

Jesus gives two examples of people starting things which they were unable to finish. The building of the tower would bring to the mind of his listeners the building of the Temple at Jerusalem, which had begun many years previously by Herod the Great and continued by his son

and heirs. Would it ever be completed? And what was it for? Jesus knew that the Temple would soon be ransacked and left a smouldering ruin. Don't take on the commitments of being a disciple of Jesus, if you can't see it through. The 2007 economic crisis might be seen as a modern equivalent. Starting in America, people were encouraged to take out mortgages they couldn't afford. Houses had to be repossessed and the bottom fell out of the housing market. Here was a man who started to build and was unable to finish.

So how about the king who started a war and did not have what it took to finish it? Jesus was probably speaking here to those who wished to remove the Romans from Palestine. The wise course here was to find the way to peace through negotiations, for Roman resources were much greater and stronger than Jewish ones. Jesus is facing his contemporaries with a moment of crisis in which they must be either Israel indeed, following God's covenant and so following him, or they must face the ruin of the tower and the devastation of the lost battle. It's not difficult to find a modern equivalent. We only need to change King to President or Prime Minister and it could be about wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. Don't start something you can't finish.

The message of today's gospel is that being a disciple of Jesus can cost me. It can cost me even the love of my family, or even life itself. Consider, for example, the position of the Syrian Christians today. These are mostly Orthodox, Eastern or Greek, Christians who are the oldest in the world going back two thousand years. It was on the road to Damascus that Paul was converted. Some Christians in Syria speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus himself. I remember looking over Lake Galilee to see the hills of Syria on the other side. It is here, so close to where Jesus grew up, that thousands of Christians have been forced from their homes by the jihadist groups. It is here that Christians have been told to convert to Islam, leave their houses and possessions, or expect to be killed. No wonder there are so many Syrian refugees. Should we stand by and merely watch? Remember no lukewarm Christians. Malcolm Guite's poem "Christ among the Refugees" states:

"Christ stands with us and withstands, where we are,
His high commission as a refugee;
To pitch his tent in our humanity."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed by the Nazi regime in 1945 for his rejection of Hitler's policy towards the Jews, wrote in his book "Discipleship" about what he called "cheap grace", grace as bargain-basement goods. "Cheap grace" he wrote, "is grace

without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Christ." We might not all be called to be killed or to die for our faith, but there are times when speaking up for our faith can cost. We may be socialising with friends who are rubbishing belief in God or in the faith of the Church. It is much easier to keep quiet than to speak out and risk ridicule, risk losing our friends. Being a disciple of Jesus can cost.

Our lives are gifts from God. We are called to follow his ways, which are not the ways of the world. We are called to die, namely death of our old self, caused by the call of Jesus. We are called to become more Christ-like and our reward is God's grace. It is not easy. In the recently published book "Graced Life", the writings of our dear friend John Hughes, Matthew Bullimore, the editor, feels it appropriate to quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "As kingfishers catch fire." The last verse reads:

"I say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is -
 Christ - for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces."

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