

Tidenham 4/9/22

Luke 14: 25-33 – Commitment and Perseverance

Prayer

What did you think when you heard that reading? Did Jesus really say that you can't be his disciple without hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself? And finish off with *anyone who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple*. Just imagine you heard those words from someone being interviewed on television, you'd think they were profoundly disturbed, off their proverbial trolley. I don't know about you but hearing these words from Jesus makes me feel very uncomfortable. Our first instinct might be to try and explain these words and make them a little softer, more acceptable even... But let's take them at face value to start with.

Jesus was provocative at times – the *gentle Jesus, meek and mild* figure does not come from the pages of the New Testament. Jesus was not a nice English gentleman. He was rugged and hard-hitting. And he spoke in the idiom of his day. According to the Semitic culture of the first century *to hate* meant to *love less*. In technical terms you expressed a comparative – *love less* – by using an opposite term – *hate*. In this context we might put it – *value less*. In other words then Jesus is saying that we need to value him more than our relatives, our life and our possessions. He needs to come first. It's a little easier to cope with but still what Jesus is saying is quite extraordinary and far-reaching. He needs to come first. Now we might think – only God could possibly claim such allegiance, and the logic of that leads us to recognise Jesus as God's Son. He is Lord, and Lord means he comes first.

Now down the centuries Christianity has had the reputation of being a negative and life-denying religion rather than one that is life-affirming. There's the caricature of the Puritan – *Thou shalt not enjoy thyself*. And we have to admit that passages such as ours today can lend themselves to this kind of understanding. So it's all the more important to try and get to grips with what Jesus is actually saying here. The first thing is reminding us that the Christian faith is a serious business. Jesus calls us to bring everything we have, whether in terms of our relationships or our possessions or our life itself in our discipleship. We can think about that.

The truth is that when it comes to any of those things that Jesus mentions, none of them lasts for ever. Our parents get older and in the end we lose them. Those of us who are parents know that successful parenting means letting-go. A couple of weeks ago we were at a barbecue to celebrate our granddaughter's 12th birthday. She paid very little attention to us; three of her friends from school were there... That's fine. Possessions – well, we all know you can't take them with you. We cannot give ultimate value to something that is not ultimate, that is passing. Only God is eternal; only Jesus was crucified, died and is risen, ascended to the Father, Lord of all.

So let's get back to this *hate* business, which probably still feels uncomfortable even granted what I said about valuing less. After all, in Scripture isn't one of the commandments to *honour our father and mother*? There are plenty of other Scriptures about caring for other members of the family. And even when it comes to our possessions, isn't it about looking after what we have been entrusted with? And with our own life, didn't Jesus say that we should love as neighbour as we love ourselves? That doesn't work at all if we *hate* our own life. There has to be a proper self-respect if we are to respect others.

I quite like – and I'm sure some of you do too – cryptic crosswords. Now if you have a crossword and you get one across completely wrong that throws everything in the top left hand corner completely out of kilter. On the other hand get it right and there's a fighting chance with the other clues around. Putting Jesus first is a little like getting one across right. Putting Jesus first in our lives means that we have a good chance of getting our relationships right with our family, and sorting out our attitudes to our possessions and indeed our own self-esteem and self-respect.

It sounds easier in theory than it is in practice. It was in church actually – not this one or anywhere around here – that I heard someone say, *Easter – it's all about the family really isn't it?* Er, no, it's about Jesus risen from the dead. And the rubber hits the road when we have to make hard choices – football for the kids or church? Here's some news – Jesus is more important than football!

It isn't easy – my parents are both 92, with dementia in a care home, and we can't sell their flat and they are running out of money, and going to see them – Dad just sits there and doesn't communicate and Mum just lists everything that's wrong and that's on a loop. Jesus' words at this point are not, shall we say, terribly helpful. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ when you have demanding responsibilities in the family? I don't have simple answers, but I do think that Jesus is encouraging us to ask the question. We do need to care for our parents but that is not the ultimate thing in our lives. It is not the absolute priority. We must also make sure that we take time for our own reading of Scripture and prayer and that we make time to come to worship with our brothers and sisters and feed on him in word and sacrament as we are doing this morning.

On a number of occasions Jesus talked about *carrying his cross* as he does here. And it's easy to misunderstand that if we think it's about our problems – that's the *cross we have to bear...* But if we lived in Jesus' time and saw someone carrying a cross, we would know they were on their way to die. So *carrying our cross* is not about bearing with stoic fortitude whatever little or big problems happen to fall on our shoulders. Carrying the cross is the same as when Jesus talks about *dying to self*. It's about thinking *I'm not the most important one here*. It's about putting Jesus first. And that can be hard and costly. And that is why Jesus in our passage encouraged his disciples to sit down and think about it first – the unfinished tower and the king who went into battle with too small an army. Think about it – are we willing to put Jesus first?

I think we need to go overseas to learn more about the cost of following Jesus. Some time ago I spent a few weeks working with church leaders in Vietnam. The man, Pastor Tin, who organised my time there had spent seven years in prison for his faith. One year he spent in solitary confinement, and he told me he was not really lonely because that's when he learnt to pray. He ran a Bible school to train church leaders. One of the students I was teaching told me he was rejoicing because he had not been arrested since Christmas – it was August. One older woman student had been divorced by her communist husband because she refused to give up the faith. These people know what it means to count the cost and choose Jesus and pay the consequence. The truth of the matter is that the Jesus who asks everything of us is precisely the Jesus who gave everything for us. He died on the cross for us. He and he alone has the right to ask from us that we give our everything to him. And when we do that, it kind of all falls into place and perspective – our relationships with family and others and our possessions. Perspective... we all need that.

Prayer