

Sermon at St John's evening on Trinity 12, 8th September 2019

In the name of God, source of all being, eternal word and Holy Spirit Amen

Words from our Gospel, '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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciples.' (Luke 14. 26-27)

It is, Luke 14. 25-33, one of the most astonishing texts of Jesus' words in the Gospels, both for its spiritual force, but also for its uncompromising demands and – in terms of language - its scope for misinterpretation. For Jesus, in a section devoted to the cost of discipleship, tells the crowds that they cannot be his disciple unless they hate the immediate members of their own family, let alone (verse 33) giving up all their possessions.

Luke 14, then, is full of hard sayings: hate your family, give up your possessions. A nice clear message for the end of the summer holidays! And in case his enthusiastic followers, from Galilee – who have witnessed his mighty deeds, and have high hopes that Jesus is the one to redeem Israel – in case his followers assume that following Jesus is easy [a simple matter of emotion & readiness to be part of the crowd] He goes on to explain that carrying his cross requires clear-sighted calculation and commitment. Like someone building a tower or a ruler deciding to wage war. One doesn't enter into such actions lightly, unless one has the

resources to complete them. And remember that, for 1st Century Jews, Temple building and the messianic struggle against Roman rule were two of the great nationalistic causes that informed their political imagination. Were Jesus' followers ready to pay the price, then, and to give all to follow him?

And of course in those days no one had ever talked about carrying a cross before... for the cross was first and foremost a symbol of Roman brutality, a sanction against rebels and criminals. So what can does Jesus possibly mean, in this dramatic passage, when he talks about carrying the cross, and how we can understand his unsettling words today? Haven't we got enough to worry about, in contemporary Britain, without hating our families, taking up a cross, and giving up our possessions? And how can such a Gospel, of Jesus, be remotely good news?

One can imagine that by the time we get to Luke 15, perhaps some of Jesus' followers from his native Galilee, who were inclined to follow him south towards Jerusalem, were beginning to have second thoughts... I'm sure I would have done, if I was in their position.

But let's delve beneath the surface and look at the text from a different angle, and see what's really going on, and what it might have to say to us today - instead of giving it the salt water treatment [first watering it down, then taking it with a pinch of salt!].

The first thing to uncover, of course, is that hating father and mother did not mean on the lips of Jesus what it conveys to the modern western reader. The semitic mind of his hearers was used to extremes – light and darkness, truth and falsehood, love and hate – primary colours with no shade of compromise in between. The semitic way of saying ‘I prefer this to that’ is ‘I like this and hate that’. Thus for followers of Jesus, to hate their families meant giving the family a second place in their affections, after their primary commitment to God...

So ‘hating’ family and life itself is an example of Jewish hyperbole. Jesus uses it to emphasise that all other allegiances must take their place under a more fundamental obedience to Him. Ties of kinship, however strong and good, must not be allowed – for Jesus’ disciples – to interfere with their absolute commitment to the Kingdom of God. Or as Angus Ritchie puts it in his commentary, ‘The waters of baptism are thicker than the blood of human kinship.’

So going back to where we started, what then do we make of Jesus’ other hard saying, that we can’t follow him unless we give up all our possessions. Or as Jesus puts it in Matthew’s Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, ‘you cannot serve God and money’. And it’s not difficult to glimpse here, something that – however challenging – does seem to speak to our times, when money has become such an idol, materialism so

commonplace, and the gap between rich and poor ever widening, whichever side of that divide we find ourselves on. It is interesting that expounding Jesus’ teaching on giving up possessions, St Bede contrasts what he calls the ‘way of the few’ – in other words those called to a literal acceptance of Jesus’ words, in a life of voluntary poverty (as monks and nuns or friars), with the role (among other things) of inspiring the whole church to behave as stewards, not ultimately owners, of their possessions, in order to bear witness to the fact that all things, in the end, belong to God, and not to us. And we are witnesses to a new creation that has dawned in Christ, where we have a new relationship to material possessions, and are encouraged not to belong to them, but to belong to Christ, and to share what we have. So, like our relationship with our families, it is about being prepared to put God first, and to affirm our core allegiance to him, before any material possessions or human greed.

So let’s finish then with Jesus’ language – now so familiar to the church, post-Good Friday and Easter – of taking up our cross to follow him. How do we make sense of this when, certainly when Jesus uttered these words, it was a symbol of extreme degradation and torture, an unlikely metaphor for life-giving discipleship? Well the first thing to acknowledge, of course, is that for many of the first followers of Jesus, including the apostles, discipleship did involve deprivation, certain conflict with the Roman authorities, and very often martyrdom. And around the world

today, there are a great many Christians facing persecution, dispossession and even the risk of death, for their loyalty to Jesus and the Gospel.

So following Jesus, then and now, isn't meant to be an easy life, and neither should obeying his radical commandments (to love our neighbour, and stand against the evils of our age) be a comfortable reality. Being a Christian is often hard work, and it requires real commitment, to be a credible in a world like our own.

But let's remember, also, that alongside the inevitable sacrifices that all of us at certain times are called upon to make, we follow a crucified messiah, whose victorious resurrection shows us that life, in the ends, comes out of death, good out of evil, and love out of hatred and violence. We may suffer, we may be understood, we may be hates, but in the end we are assured of full and eternal life, through the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus.

And leaving everything behind, daring to renounce all that prevents us from being his disciples, is ultimately (in terms of our inmost heart and its core loyalties) the surprising way to freedom and peace and joy, in relationship with Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. What C S Lewis describes as 'A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)'. Or as Jesus puts it elsewhere, in Matthew 16,

'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

God does not call us to perfection, neither must we expect perfect happiness in this life – life is hard, and the illusion of a perfect life, with health, wealth and unceasing happiness (such that our society holds out to us today) is an illusion; but true joy – the Gospel tells us - comes from loving God with all our heart, from following Jesus with all our mind, and from loving our neighbours (which includes our families), out of this whole-hearted commitment to God - in the way of the Cross. Dare to follow this way, says Jesus, and you will live.

In the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. Amen