

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Deuteronomy 30. 15-20

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14. 25-33

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We live in a market-driven society, do we not? Wherever we may find ourselves, whatever our circumstances might be, we receive countless messages every day that are intended to ‘sell’ us something. Just yesterday afternoon, I went to look for something on Amazon, and immediately I had a series of proposals before me: products that were inspired by my ‘wish list’; products that were offered because of my ‘browsing history’; products that were proposed by my past ‘buying trends’; and if that weren’t enough, still other items that were ‘new for me’; or ‘just for me to consider’. I’m afraid that I gave up very quickly. It’s probably a good thing, as my Visa card will now not wreak any more havoc on my bank account.

And have you noticed? It’s not only ‘things’ that we are asked to buy. We’re also invited to take on new ideas; new goals and aspirations; new hopes and promises; new ways of living and thinking and being. A recent razor company advert told men (especially the ones who have beards) that the time has come to ‘free’ their skin. Another milk company has featured Venus Williams, the gold medallist and tennis champion, promising that ‘plants bring power’: if you and I will simply adopt a vegan diet, our healthy lifestyles will be fuelled. And in the past few months, a major contender for the next American presidency has promised, if elected, to ‘sow a little hope and love’.

The market-driven promises are out there; and they are often proposed with extra perks that will hopefully convince us: perks such as ‘free trial’, ‘low-cost’, or ‘low risk’.

Our appointed gospel text for today, taken from Luke 14, offers a clear challenge to any market-driven approach to Christian mission. The text begins with two discipleship sayings that require absolute allegiance to our Lord (14. 25-27). Then Jesus provides two brief stories or parables to illustrate the importance of ‘counting the cost’ and giving up all for him (14. 28-33).

Christ’s first discipleship saying is framed in stark language: ‘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’ (14. 25).

The language of this particular saying raises concerns for many. Our Lord’s ethic of love makes it unthinkable that one should hate his or her own family. Does our Lord really call us to *hate* our biological families and (what’s more) our very lives? Allow me to make two observations that will hopefully be helpful.

Firstly, in this text Jesus is using a Semitic hyperbole that *exaggerates a contrast so that it can be seen more clearly*. The word ‘hate’ (*miseo* in Greek) does not mean anger or hostility. It indicates *preference*: if there is a conflict, our response to discipleship must take precedence even over family, the most sacred of human relationships. There is no duty higher than commitment to Christ and to being his disciple.

Our Lord often used such hyperboles this in his teachings. In a parallel passage in the gospel of Matthew, he says, ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than

me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me' (10. 34, 37-38).

My second observation is this: as F.F. Bruce has pointed out, throughout the Bible there is a tendency to use the word 'hate' when what is really meant is a secondary form of love. So when in the book of Deuteronomy there are regulations for a man with two wives (one of who is loved and one of whom is 'hated', 21. 15), the meaning is not that there is literal, visceral hatred per se of the second wife; but more that the second wife is less preferred than the first. Similarly, when God says things like 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau' in the book of Malachi (1. 3), the meaning is not that God literally hates Esau or his kin in the colloquial use of that word; but rather that Jacob was loved more than Esau.

The second discipleship saying in our passage emphasises the same point about loyalty. Discipleship is defined by following Jesus and by 'carrying the cross.' Unfortunately, the language of carrying the cross has been corrupted by over-use. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships (although my wife Claudia may contradict me here). It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Christ. Cross-bearing commitment is not just a way of life; it is a commitment to a person. A disciple follows another person and learns a new way of life.

I'm sure that you have noticed something: neither of these discipleship sayings of our Lord are 'market-driven promises', leading to an 'easy believism' or a 'low-cost' form of faith. Instead, they stress the high cost of following Jesus.

The two brief parables that follow illustrate this cost by suggesting two scenarios. The first envisions a landowner building a tower, either for storing produce or guarding land and animals (14. 28-30). If the landowner has not estimated how much

the tower will cost, it is possible that the project will remain unfinished due to lack of funds. The end result will be ridicule from all who see the unfinished structure.

The second parable is about a king who assesses the number of his troops in light of the greater number that his enemy possesses (14. 31-32). If he cannot win with the number of soldiers he has, the only wise course will be to negotiate with his enemy long before they meet in battle. Christ uses these two stories to illustrate the necessity of 'counting the cost' of discipleship.

Following our Lord is an all-or-nothing proposition. The concluding sentence in our text makes the connections clear: 'In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple' (14. 33).

In a sense, we could say that no-one can know whether he or she will be able to truly fulfil a commitment to discipleship. Jesus was not asking for a guarantee of complete fidelity in advance. If he had, no-one would qualify to be a disciple. Yet through these parables, Christ is clearly calling those of us would be disciples to consider first what that commitment requires.

Cultural accommodation of the Christian faith in society and human behaviour has progressed steadily in recent years. As a result, many people see no tension between the teachings of our Lord and their common aspirations. But a complete change of priorities, values and pursuits is required. St Paul wrote that in Christ, we become not just 'nice people' but 'new creations' (2 Cor 5. 17). When Jesus turned and saw the large crowd following him, he was not impressed by his own success. He was not interested in the casual, easy acceptance the crowd offered.

The cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency. For some people, a re-direction of time and energy is required; for others, a change in personal

relationships is needed; or for others still, a re-arranging of financial goals. For each and every person, however, the call to discipleship is all-consuming. A complete change in priorities is required of all who would be disciples. No part-time disciples are needed; and no partial commitments are desired.

Amen.