

## SERMON FOR THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – YEAR C

Sunday 8 September 2019

I wonder what might happen to a product being advertised on television, if the advertisement told the truth about that product. Truth and advertising are not considered to be close associates, and whether its advertising or our leaders, people telling the truth, being straight up with their opinions is not considered to be an effective marketing or political strategy, especially in the age of “post-truth”. Which makes me wonder why Christianity isn’t even less popular than it is nowadays. Because in today’s gospel reading, Jesus drops what is known nowadays as a ‘truth-bomb’ on his listeners.

As we re-join Luke’s gospel, Jesus has just left the Pharisees’ house where he was dining in last week’s gospel reading. Luke states that at this point of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, large crowds were travelling with him. But with seemingly no qualms about potentially losing any of his followers, Jesus turns to them and says, "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 disciple." "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

On the face of it, Jesus seems to propose three totally unreasonable requirements for becoming his disciple: hate one’s family; carry the cross; and give up all your possessions. Each time Jesus says that “you cannot be my disciple” unless you do these things. The phrase is exactly the same in all three verses in Greek, but not translated that way in English.

Firstly, you need to hate your family.

Jesus spoke his hard words about “hating” one’s family in a cultural context where the extended family was the sole source of a person’s security and stability. Individuals had no real existence apart from their ties to their family, especially their parents. In the Middle East, the main rule is: family first!

A disciple who deliberately cut ties with their family would probably thus lose the means of making a living. A disciple who accepted the life of following Christ would have effectively given up everything. This was true of Jesus’ disciples. Later in Luke’s gospel Peter says to Jesus, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." In this culture, no one in their right mind would leave the safety and security of their family behind in order to follow a homeless, controversial preacher into some uncertain future.

The thing about this saying of Jesus is that the word which is translated “hate” is not really as animosity-laden as the English word we use. It really means "to turn away from or to separate from" or even, to “prefer.” So basically Jesus is saying that the disciple must choose between allegiance to the family and allegiance to Jesus.

Secondly, would-be disciples need to carry the cross and follow him. This saying has of course come down to us today as “That’s the cross I have to bear.” This saying refers to bearing illness, pain, or any other difficult situation we may have in our lives. Unfortunately, this is not what Jesus is saying. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, trying family relationships or anything like that. For the early Christians, who heard Luke’s gospel, taking up your cross meant real exposure to risk in order to follow Jesus and to be prepared to endure severe suffering, even to the point of death. It could mean literally taking up a cross.

So to say Jesus’ teaching here is hard is a laughable understatement. Jesus knows it’s hard, so he then tells two parables to illustrate to the crowd listening to him to stop and consider whether they are willing to pay the cost before they sign up to be his followers. A careful builder, he says, never breaks ground without taking a good, hard look at the budget. Likewise, an astute general doesn’t declare war unless the assembled troops are sufficiently equipped and well-trained to defeat any enemy.

And just to finish everything off, Jesus adds another zinger, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Giving up possessions is a particular theme of Luke’s gospel. But if you look at what Jesus says about giving up possessions, it suggests that not only is Jesus saying we need to give up material belongings if they get in the way of our relationship with God, but also that we need to give up those things in life that we cling to instead of God, those things which ultimately possess us.

This week’s Gospel reading makes it clear that following Jesus is extremely demanding. Yet Jesus doesn’t sugar-coat his message in order to sell it. He doesn’t cut corners, and he doesn’t soften the blow. He tells it like it is. All of which makes me wonder whether the crowds suddenly thinned, whether people lost interest or decided that perhaps following this Jesus bloke was just a bit too much to ask.

Jesus’ claim on life is absolute. He doesn’t want a little bit of us. He doesn’t want a couple of hours on a Saturday evening / Sunday morning. He wants the lot. Yet we tend to want to embrace a Christianity that doesn’t involve costly choices. We want to experience Jesus the saviour, Jesus the friend, but not so much Jesus the prophet who barges into our lives and asks us to trade in our low-cost, low-risk version of the Christian faith for something far more demanding.

This will be a difficult task for us in a culture that insists that sacrifice is great, as long as someone else does it, and that what we possess is the most important thing we need to work towards. Discipleship requires a reordering of our priorities and putting away those things which stop us from following God. It asks us to examine our lives and ask ourselves what we need to renounce or abandon in order to follow Jesus.

Jesus seeks disciples who are aware of the cost of following him -- and who choose to follow anyway.