

## **Sermon on Luke 14: 25-33**

### **Discipleship: Cost and Joy**

**So Jesus can't possibly mean what he says.**

That's our first reaction to passages like this one in Luke's Gospel.

'Anyone who comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes even life itself – such a person cannot be my disciple.'

What on earth?

Jesus spends so much time telling us to love one another, now he's telling us to hate those closest to us?

Our immediate family?

Even our very lives?

Can't be so surely.

So it's generally assumed in such circumstances that the preacher's job is to explain why Jesus can't possibly mean what he says.

Or at least to mollify what is clearly a ridiculous idea, like the translator who tones down any inflammatory rhetoric for diplomatic reasons.

And to be frank when I read this passage in preparation for this morning my immediate thought was how on earth anyone would find this encouraging.

It might make us feel a little bewildered perhaps as we go back to the routines of the next week – how does that apply to the realities of the ordinary - but it's hard to imagine how it would really inspire us in our walk with Jesus.

So on a couple of fronts at least, things aren't looking all that promising today.

Maybe we should just skip it and come back next week?

The story of the prodigal son lies just over the page in the next chapter, perhaps moving onto it fairly quickly mightn't be a bad idea?

**We forget though, and I'm as guilty of this as anyone, that Jesus is not a comfortable Messiah.**

His mission is not to make us feel comfortable about our relative comfort.

His mission is to teach us the way of the cross.

To make us disciples.

To get us to see in his death and resurrection a deeper vision of God and God's loving nature and to be willing, however imperfectly, to take up that way ourselves.

More often than not his message is disruptive and disturbing, challenging us to forgo wealth and comfort and to see that we are eternally richer by being in relationship with him, than clinging to any material possessions we might accrue throughout our lives.

Challenging us to be peacemakers in a war torn world and to live into lives of justice and grace, rather than self interest and greed.

We're supposed to feel uncomfortable when he speaks just as we're supposed to realise that following in his way, what we call faith, brings with it a cost.

It's actually okay to sit with our discomfort a bit without chasing it away.

It might just prove illuminating for us.

As we see in Jesus' own life the cost of faithfulness may be death, though this is perhaps less likely for most of us.

But stepping back from that ultimate sacrifice, it may be cost in time, in money, even in relationships we would consider most dear.

All things that will create discomfort for us. If anything gets in the road of following me, Jesus says, it is to be hated.

There will always be a true cost to true discipleship.

**Being at Iona Abbey (apologies but you're probably going to get some Scottish sermon illustrations for a little while...), you might think that in such a tranquil and beautiful part of the world it has been relatively painless to maintain the life of faith.**

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Around the walls of the Abbey museum you can read some of the notable points in the Abbey's history.

And there was one moment in about the 9<sup>th</sup> century that particularly caught my eye.

The community was worshipping one Sunday when Viking raiders attacked the Abbey during worship.

All the brethren were killed and as they approached the priest the Vikings demanded he hand over the prized possessions of the Abbey.

The priest refused and as the wall recounted rather plainly and unemotionally, he met a violent death.

Now you might think that such a horrific event would put off Christians from ever establishing a community in such a place again.

Yet it didn't.

Such was the reverence for St Columba, the founder of the community in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, and for the faithful who had borne the cost over the hundreds of years hence that pretty soon the community was back up and running, worship re-established, and in one way or another despite further traumatic incidents along the way, the Christian faith has been there ever since.

So two Sundays ago I worshipped there in that very place among Christians from around the world proclaiming the dying and rising Lord and praying for the strength to carry on in faith.

The church there is no different to the church here really.

They sing, they pray, they seek to witness.

They have their problems and challenges like we do.

They deal with the same human frailties we do.

Yet they're there, as we are here, seeking to be faithful and bear the cross of Christ, as their forebears have for years before them.

**So, it's costly is Jesus' point.**

And that's actually more important than however uncomfortable we may feel when we're confronted with costly ways of being.

Faith, discipleship, the way of the cross, it's not an adjunct to the really important things in life, *it is* life itself in the deepest sense.

Jesus does mean what he says, and while obviously there is hyperbole being used here as a rhetorical device, the point behind it is in no way exaggerated.

We're not being told to hate our families as a pre-requisite of faith, rather Jesus is saying we mustn't find convenient reasons to shy away from the Calvary road.

To ease back into un-costly comfort, which we're all want to do.

Those reasons could be manifold of course, really anything we might get too attached to, and they're all around us everywhere and ever more alluring.

The Good Samaritan had every reason to pass by the victim on the Jericho road, yet he doesn't.

The father had every reason to be harsh with his returned prodigal son, yet he isn't.

On the flip side, the rich young ruler had every reason not to obey Jesus' command to give up all his wealth and so he didn't.

In each case there is a cost to be borne to have our lives shaped by the cross and the challenge of the question is ever before us.

**But the trick is not to live this costly faith as if it's a burden, but rather a joy.**

Faith is meant to be joyful, not like a millstone around our necks.

Remember Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden light.

This is equally hard in our world which teaches us that hoarding things for ourselves is what will make us happy and we should be cautious about how much we give away.

That no opportunity should be missed for helping ourselves and squeezing every possible personal benefit out of our experience.

To give you an example, I take great pleasure in giving tips to the staff when Lucy and I go out for a meal or something.

There's a joy I find in the mutual exchange of gracious service and a small and unexpected monetary acknowledgement as a gift.

There's a little moment of delight in this little human exchange.

Often surprise and gratitude is expressed which I greatly enjoy.

Warmth is shared and I'm sure both parties come away feeling a little better about the day.

But my joyful exuberance for this serendipitous ritual was crushed the other day.

I was paying for my coffee and cake at a café and I noticed that on the eftpos machine it now asks specifically if the customer is going to leave a tip.

Then to my horror the waiter asked me the same question directly.

'Would you like to leave a tip?'

I felt like answering well yes I would, but I don't want to be asked, that completely removes the spontaneous joy of it.

That makes it into a transaction, rather than a gift, that commodifies it, makes it a burden with pressure, almost coercion.

That takes a little relational moment of connection, of grace, and turns it into another business deal, a duty, a tax.

If we look on faith like that, like God asks us are you going to be a disciple today, and then waits for an answer with a clipboard, a swinging light, and a checklist, just like he's waiting for us to swipe our card through the machine and make a payment, we're getting the wrong impression of faith.

Faith is costly, for sure, but if we don't find spontaneous joy in following after Jesus, if it's a burden or chore, if we feel pressured to make a transaction, we're moving away from the true nature of God's calling.

Yes it's demanding and requires great courage and sacrifice.

But Paul says rejoice in the Lord always.

And even when living the Gospel had taken him to jail, he is still found singing hymns of praise.

Take joy in this costly way of life is the message, in seeing the world through the lens of Jesus, because in the end death leads on to resurrection and eternal joy.

**So, I confess it was kind of strange having spent two weeks with my mother to open up my bible for today's service and read, if anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother they cannot be my disciple.**

Clearly my discipleship needs some work I thought.

Yet Jesus is not trying to turn us against each other and certainly not our families.

We all remember that the commandment says, 'honour your father and your mother so that your days may be long in the land your Lord has given you.'

No, rather he is prodding us in the side.

Provoking us out of our complacency.

Shouting his message of love into our indifference.

Reminding us that in following him we follow the one who went to death and rose again for us.

In the hope of getting us to live faithfully, accepting the cost, and yet finding in giving ourselves away at the same time the joy of his Kingdom and Gospel.

In one of the sermons I heard while I was away the preacher told of a t-shirt one of his colleagues liked to wear: it said in big words 'God Loves You', and then in brackets and slightly smaller words underneath, 'But I'm his favourite.'

The satire conveys well the underlying point.

God doesn't play favourites.

He doesn't single people out or in.

We all receive this same challenge to be a disciple of Jesus and all must grapple with its consequences in our own way.

The good news is we do this together.

In company.

We're here for each other to say, 'I'll walk with you when the road gets hard.'

I'll mourn with you when you're bereaved.'

'I'll pray and praise week by week with you in worship.'

And ultimately, 'I'll die into Christ with you when my time comes and ask that you'll do the same for me.'

And all the way from Iona to Bowral and right across the world this company extends.

Being a disciple of Jesus is a costly and yet joyful path.

A little bit of faith can go a long way if we'll be willing to be challenged, bear the cost, and grow more deeply into God day by day.

Do this, and we all, I'm sure, will be counted and might count ourselves as disciples.

In Jesus' name. Amen.