

The Cost of Discipleship...

... Are we all in?

The sermon given at Choral Evensong by the Curate, the Revd. Tim Kelly, on 8th March 2020, in Beverley Minster.

Numbers 21:4-9; Luke 14:27-33

We started our Lent course this week based on the TV series written by Jimmy McGovern – 'Broken'. It's started well, already generating some excellent discussion. Because of the nature of the TV series (some of the language used; some of the topics covered; and some of the violence in the episodes), we felt compelled to provide a warning and disclaimer to those thinking about attending. One of the phrases we used was 'this is not for the faint-hearted'. I was struck that tonight's gospel passage from Luke should perhaps come with the same warning and disclaimer ... 'not for the faint-hearted'. The passage is often titled 'The Cost of Discipleship'. If we're honest, and we truly engage with what Jesus is saying, it's not an easy passage.

I want you to imagine for a moment a politician standing on the hustings and saying, "Vote for me ... vote for me and if you do I promise you a life of higher taxes and lower wages ... you might even lose your house!" Many of us would be simply be open-mouthed at such a declaration. This is not a manifesto that we would rush to sign ourselves up to, let alone promote to others. Yet, this perhaps sounds similar to what Jesus is saying in this passage. He's telling the crowd that if you want to be my disciple you must be willing to 'pick up and carry your own cross' ... using an image that, even before Jesus' own death on a cross, would have been well understood by the listening Judean crowd - carrying your own cross, on which you yourself should be prepared to die. This is no small ask on Jesus' part.

Immediately preceding tonight's passage Jesus has uttered the equally shocking words "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."

Again, it's understandable for the crowd (and ourselves) to be open-mouthed at this statement. Be willing to hate my family? Be willing to sacrifice my own life? Surely you don't *mean* that Jesus?

If you were to ask people on the street what they consider to be important in life you might hear them say, "Well ... *family* comes first, and your *health* ... If you've got your health and you've got your family - those are the important things". Now of course, Jesus' isn't disregarding the importance of family - elsewhere he emphasises the commandment to 'honour father and mother'. However, he is challenging the 'family above all else' mentality that can prevail. If your priorities are firstly Family, secondly personal health and well-being, and lagging behind in third place, 'following Jesus', then he is saying 'you are not truly my disciple'.

So far this may all sound a little too demanding and one-sided, so rather than our politician, I want you to imagine the leader of an expedition - a Sir Edmund Hillary type figure - who is talking to us at a mountain base camp. He's warning us that the path ahead is narrow and steep - too steep to carry all the things that we have been carrying up to that point. He's warning us that to follow him is potentially costly, potentially risky. Safe return to base camp is not guaranteed - so maybe some last postcards home would be sensible. To proceed from this point, to carry out the expedition from this point onwards, requires our total commitment. Hearing those words, we might be equally apprehensive, but we would probably understand. For a number of reasons it's this second image that more closely resembles that of Jesus in this passage. Firstly, we're being invited on the expedition together: none of the 'them and us' that we might expect from a politician. Secondly, alongside risk there's clearly reward and we need to keep within reach the other sayings of Jesus, elsewhere in the Gospels: "whoever loses his life will save it"; his promise that he came so that we may have and experience life to the full. If we focus only on the risks, we will never reap the rewards. Someone once wisely pointed out that if parents knew ahead of time only the pain and challenge of children but were not able to see the immeasurable joy, the world would be childless. So it is with discipleship: the joy of Jesus' teachings is worth the cost of commitment.

And when Jesus says, "Whoever loses his life will save it", we should remember the flip-side that he also says "whoever saves his life will lose it". Here, we are being challenged as to what it is that we hold as important ... On one of my invited university trips to Beijing, having a conversation with some young academics over a drink and talking a little about university life and their own jobs, they said to me "Well of course, your being a professor and your academic career ... you've made it, that must be everything to you, right". I surprised them by saying, "No ... it's not

everything to me. My faith is everything to me. You could take away my university job, title, status ... but if you took away my faith that would be devastating ... That's everything". So perhaps we should ask ourselves "What is it that we hold most tightly onto?"

The two illustrations Jesus gives in our text this evening - the builder who starts a building but has no idea whether he'll be able to finish it or the king who enters into battle without a serious consideration of whether the battle can actually be won - remind us that following Jesus isn't something that we should enter into lightly without giving serious thought to the consequences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, "The Cost of Discipleship", famously warns of the problem of 'cheap grace': 'cheap grace' is accepting the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation freely offered by God and won for us (at a price) through Jesus' actions on the cross, but not demanding anything from us in return - no tough path of repentance, discipline, attempting to tread as apprentices following Jesus' footsteps.

People have asked me how it is that I made the journey into full-time Church of England ministry and become a member of the clergy and this passage reminds me of a particular point early in that journey. Having felt the pull towards ordination, but having wrestled with what it would mean in terms of 'letting go', I clearly remember reaching a point during one church gathering when I finally prayed (silently) "OK, if it's what you want me to do, I'll do it. I'll do whatever you're asking me to do". This was not a superficial prayer ... it was a prayer of total commitment ... not knowing what lay ahead - the many interviews, assessment panels, years of training that awaited. Beverley Minster wasn't even a twinkle in my eye.

As disciples, following in obedience and with commitment, our journeys will be different, but there is a common path that we are called to travel on -. Jesus is not trying to dissuade us, but instead is calling us to not just nervously and cautiously paddle in the shallow end of the swimming pool, but instead, to be willing to let go of the things we hold dear, let go of the hand rails, trust him and join him in the deep end where he promises to hold our hands - he calls us to life of adventure and fulfilment. Jesus is asking us, "Are we all in?"

Reading Texts

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Luke 14:27-33

²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.