

I spend important waking hours exploring how we as the church here can reach out to people with the Good News, how we can welcome and win people, how we can make new disciples, how we can grow the church. So I get really exercised about what we look like, how we appear to people, whether our notices are correct, what impression we are making. Just have a think about what's daft about us – like having massive welcoming entrances and then shutting as many of the doors as possible so people have to go through a tiny opening and do a Formula One chicane to get in. I bet there are things we do – you do – which when you think about it are just silly and you'd never get away with if we were a retail business, for example. It's ridiculous if the church puts people off before we start – as if we were the kind of shop or café you look at in a new town and think: 'not today, thanks'.

I want people to come here and find out how they and Jesus can get to know each other. I want that process to be as easy and open as possible. I want people who are new to be welcomed without being overwhelmed. What does it feel like if you walk through the door and there are four people ready to pounce on you, for example? I want the regulars here to be inclusive, to invite people they don't know to stay for coffee. And at the moment I'm keen to invite people to come to Alpha: to ask questions, to learn about Christ, to come to faith and say 'yes, I've signed up for this'. There's plenty of time to sign up!

I want all this. So I'd rather not be challenged by our Gospel reading today, from Luke 14. Jesus has got a huge crowd tagging along and hanging on his every word. It's total success. In today's terms he is 'trending' – everyone wants a piece of him. For this massive crowd he can do no wrong. So what does he do? He turns round and tells them that they've got it wrong – that following him is far harder than they are thinking. These words constitute, I think, the greatest challenge Jesus ever gave to people. If you really want to follow me then make a careful calculation. Carry the cross. Follow me. Give up your possessions. I don't want this, just now. But we've got to look at it. So here goes.

Carry the Cross. This is scandalous. The Romans reserved this form of execution for the peoples they despised. Jews of Jesus's day would have been familiar with this public form of humiliating and excruciating death. Jesus tells those who would follow him to embrace their own dying and death, to let the world know that there is a life which is more important than scrabbling around trying to gain fulfilment and power now.

It's not as if our deaths will really shake the world too much – but it is, of course, central to us. These words are spoken by the man who would go to his own Cross, and whose death did change the world. The cross we take up then is not just our own death – our recognition that we are mortal – but our identification with the death of Jesus the Christ. Embracing Christ means dying with him – as a Christian we have already died to everything we once desired, and have risen with Christ to a life which glorifies only God.

Follow Me. Self denial is all a bit joyless, isn't it? Its lowest form is seen in Lenten observance – all this forgoing chocolate. What thrills me about Jesus Christ is that his life was completely given to his Father and to his people, and yet he enjoyed himself hugely. Perhaps the greatest self denial is to give yourself to someone else – to God and those around you. Thinking about denying yourself is the beginning of planning your life around

following Christ – just as a proper project (like building a tower), needs planning and execution.

Following Jesus is about the centre of your life. It is about finding fulfilment in service, and in dying and rising with Christ. It is about putting your whole self in the hands of God, and showing you have done so by embracing the way of service, and clinging on to the cross, because only when everything you think will save you has been put to death can life begin anew.

Give up your Possessions. If you want to follow me, do this. Set aside all your ambitions and hope for yourself, all the things you think you **need** (but actually they are things you **want**) and pick up the one thing you would most want to avoid – the reality of your own death, which could happen at any time.

The Son of God comes to us stripped of his heavenly glory, voluntarily setting aside his power, taking the form of a servant. In Jesus day you didn't do what your teachers told you to do. You did what they did. There is no clearer lesson for us than this, that to carry the name of Christ is to live the life of Christ, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, caring for the poor, washing the feet of the one who betrayed him – and to recognise that our possessions possess us sometimes.

How about that for a set of challenges? It's not the normal way you'd ask people to sign up to your project. This stuff would be the small print in a legal contract, not the headline. What's amazing about this is that people kept coming to listen, and giving up what they had to follow Jesus. The very next verse (Luke 15. 1) says that so many tax collectors and sinners were doing so that the religious insiders and opinion formers grumbled about it. Far from being off putting, Jesus was so clearly getting to the heart of things that people 'got it' and wanted to do it.

Paul Tillich, the philosopher and theologian said this:

Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified, have no knowledge of the mystery of God and of man.

So I still want to say that we are welcoming and church is great and you should come and join us, and I'd like you to come to Alpha. I want the whole of the church to commit to praying for the Alpha Course every morning this week – it's that important. I do want us to stop being just plain odd and baffling (where we are). I want to say that this Christian life is exhilarating and all consuming and the best thing there is. But I want to be clear: this exhilarating adventure is costly. If you have ears, says Jesus, use them. There is more to life than you think. And following Christ – losing your life for him, losing your possessions for him - will give you more than you could ever imagine. It will give you your life back. I promise.