

**SERMON – 7/9/25**

Luke 14:25-35

“Anyone who does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27)

I’m not sure who it was who said that a preacher should be like a lion in the pulpit but like a lamb in the vestry - in other words, that the message of the Gospel as it is publicly proclaimed should be powerful, persuasive, demanding, uncompromising even, but that the person who comes seeking guidance as to how to apply the Gospel message in their own situation should be treated with kid gloves and gently shown the way. On the other hand there is a school of thought that says that the public proclamation of the Gospel should always be gentle and winsome, seeking to woo and encourage those who hear it, by the declaration of the gracious love of God, but that when someone comes to the preacher desiring to follow Christ, the challenges of Christian discipleship should be laid down bluntly and unambiguously and every reason should be given them for *not* entering upon the way of Christ.

I suspect that the answer lies somewhere between those two approaches - there is a time to be gentle and winsome from the pulpit just as there is a time to be forceful and demanding in public preaching; and there is a time to be encouraging in the vestry just as there is a time to issue a challenge at a one to one level. What the Gospels do *not* allow for, it seems to me, is a Christianity that is like a comfortable old coat that we slip on and off with ease and without thought. It seems to me that Jesus was being very far from gentle and winsome when He said, “Anyone who does not carry their *cross* and follow me cannot be my disciple.” How do those words strike us, I wonder?

Well, let’s begin by looking at the context in which Jesus made that astonishing statement. Luke tells us that large crowds were travelling with Jesus - He was hugely popular, but by this stage in the Gospel He had set His face resolutely towards Jerusalem and the Cross that He knew was waiting for *Him* there. Now there was no room for stragglers or for those who were merely curious; the time was past for standing in one place for a whole day to teach about the coming Kingdom; it was time now to throw out a

stiff challenge and to weed out those who were not seriously committed. It almost sounds as if Jesus was trying to put people off from following Him - "If anyone comes to me and does not hate their father and mother, their wife and children, their brothers and sisters, even their own life, they cannot be my disciple." That's some challenge! But then Jesus knew what lay ahead for Himself and for those who followed Him - mockery, injustice, suffering and death itself. It's little wonder Jesus wanted to put off all but the dedicated.

Actually, He speaks three times in this morning's reading about people who 'cannot be my disciple.' First, as we've been saying, those who do not *hate* those closest to them cannot be His disciple; second, those who do not carry their cross and follow Him cannot be His disciple; and third, He says that those who do not give up everything they have cannot be His disciple. To quote a phrase that appears in a similar context elsewhere in the Gospel, "This is hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Who indeed! And if it sounded hard then, from the lips of the Son of God, amidst the excitement of following Him along the road and seeing Him in action, how much harder does it sound in the cold light of twenty first century Britain when challenge and commitment are even less popular or acceptable than they were then?

Firstly, Jesus said: "Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and themselves as well." (v.26) As always, of course, we must never take a single verse of Scripture and build a theology on what it alone says. You cannot hear Jesus speak about hating others and forget that He also said, "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you." I'm not suggesting that we try to water down what Jesus is saying here, but there is certainly no excuse in these words to incite Christian people to hatred of their families. Jesus using these rather shocking words not to incite us to hatred but to highlight the extent of the love that Christians are called to have towards the Lord. Our love for Jesus should be so great that even the best of earthly love - the love of children for their parents, parents for their children, husbands and wives for each other, or whatever our greatest experience of human

love may be - even the best of earthly love must *seem* like hatred in comparison to what we give to Jesus. Our love for Jesus must take us into a new dimension of loving. And how? "This is how we know what love is, says the apostle John, Jesus Christ laid down His life for us." What love He has for us! What unspeakable love! Jesus says to us today as He once said to Simon Peter, "Do you truly love me *more than these?*" Let the best of the love we have for ourselves and for other human beings be like hatred in comparison to what we give to the Jesus who died for us. Love for Jesus – that's discipleship.

Secondly, Jesus said, "Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples." (v.27) And He tells the little parable about someone planning to build a tower. It may be a relatively uncommon occurrence to undertake a building project, but all our lives are filled with projects and schemes of one kind or another, and we don't just jump into things without thinking through the implications, especially if our hard-earned savings are involved. It's probably true to say that one of the greatest influences on us as we try to make decisions is what other people will think of us if we can't see the project through to a satisfactory conclusion. Jesus is encouraging us to think a little bit that way with regard to our commitment to Him. It's a serious and far-reaching matter, being a disciple of Jesus - but we often sit very lightly indeed to our commitments. We make glib promises and make little effort to carry them through to fulfilment - God will be gracious to us, we say to ourselves; He will forgive our failures and our faithlessness; and so He will. But just stop and think how much that forgiveness cost Him – the sacrifice of His one and only Son. Jesus considered exactly what it would cost Him to carry out the Father's saving purpose, and He carried it through to the bitterest of ends. What an incredible gift He has given us! Will we take our discipleship seriously enough to count the cost of following Jesus realistically? May we indeed take up our cross and may we indeed follow Jesus to the end of the way. Considered commitment and dedicated service – that's discipleship.

But thirdly Jesus tells what at first sight may seem like the same parable as before just couched in terms of a king going to battle

rather than someone building a tower, but there's a significant difference. In the first story there was a choice – a tower didn't *have* to be built - but in the second story the king was faced with no choice at all as to whether he took action or not, because there were 20,000 enemy troops coming against the 10,000 soldiers who made up his own army. The only choice he had was whether to advance and fight or whether to send and ask for terms of peace. The same counting of the cost is there, but in the second case it is done not from choice but from necessity. Now, for the most part, we have a great deal of freedom in our lives and the opportunity to make a whole host of choices - one among them whether or not to follow Jesus Christ. But there is one crucial matter in which none of us has any choice about, and that is our mortality. There is nothing we can do about the fact that Death is ranged against each one of us just like the enemy army was ranged against the king in the parable. What are we each going to do in the face of death? We can choose to ignore it, of course, although that won't make it go away; we can choose to squeeze the most we can out of this life and cock a snoot at death with an 'Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' approach; or we can give up everything we have of this world's treasures and make peace with God through Jesus Christ, living in a new dimension of life now and entering into paradise with the Saviour when we die. Yielding our very life to Christ – that's discipleship.

Jesus said, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." If we want to know what that really means, we need to look at Jesus Himself. If you read the account of Jesus' trial and suffering and death, you can see all the opportunities He had to turn back from the course that He was on, either by publicly denying that He was the Messiah and giving up His ministry, or indeed by unleashing the full extent of His power and casting aside any who stood in His way. But He was totally committed to the way of the Cross and He stood firm in the face of everything that was thrown at Him. He remained silent as the Sanhedrin went through their kangaroo court; He offered no evidence in His defence before the Roman authorities; He stood and took the ridicule of King Herod and his soldiers; He watched as a terrorist was released to the baying crowd from

prison; He saw Pilate's resolve weaken before the mob and He received the death sentence without a murmur. His concern as He was led to Calvary was not for Himself but for the people of Jerusalem; He took His place nailed to a cross between two criminals and watched as the guards gambled for His clothes; He listened to the sneers of those who thought they had got the better of Him; He spoke kind and gracious words to one of the men crucified with Him; He bore not only the physical punishment of the cross, one of the most barbarous means of execution ever devised, but beyond what we can ever understand or even contemplate, He took upon Himself the sin of the world and endured separation from God, the pain of hell. That's what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus - to give up everything and to count love for God more important than *anything* else.

These are not easy words to say. Is Christianity like a comfortable old coat that you can slip on and off easily and thoughtlessly whenever it suits you? The cultural Christianity that masquerades as Christian faith and discipleship in far too many church members in Western society today is just that. But Christian discipleship is about much more than an outer layer.

The call to follow Christ is a high and a demanding one - that is undeniable. Some people hear the challenge of Christian discipleship and after counting the cost they decide to turn back. Some people hear the call to discipleship with gladness but fail to consider the full implications of what Jesus is asking of them and sooner or later fall by the wayside. But some people not only hear the challenge of the Christian calling but also recognise that it is only in dying to the fleeting pleasures and passing glories of this world that we are born to the eternal life that God is holding out to us in Jesus Christ.

It is my prayer today that we will each not only hear the call of Christ upon our life but that we will consider very carefully the claim that He is making upon us and that we will determine, with Christ's help, to dedicate our life *wholeheartedly* to Him, for in doing so we will inherit all the riches of eternity. Challenging? Oh yes. But rewarding too – beyond our wildest dreams.