



counting the cost

“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.” Not necessarily the Gospel passage I would have chosen for my last Sunday sermon here!

What are we to make of such a teaching as this? How can we reconcile these words with the one who came to literally embody God's love for us and all humankind? As is often the case, there are no easy answers. One school of thought to help us digest this uncomfortable teaching is linguistic – that in Jesus' day this was a common figure of speech; to state a preference by pairing two things together and saying you loved one and hated the other. This figure of speech had everything to do with preference and nothing to do with emotions. Even if that is the case, it's still very difficult to redeem this teaching from our contemporary perspective and understanding, or even to reconcile it with the commandment to honour your father and your mother.

As always, it's important to look at the context of this passage. You may remember our Gospel reading last week, also from Luke, was Jesus talking about the wedding banquet, when the invited guests didn't show up and so the host broadened the invitation to include the poor, the blind, the crippled and the lame; and immediately after this passage in Luke come the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, in which those who others might see as insignificant are searched for and welcomed home with rejoicing.

This context can help us as we grapple with these hard words of Jesus, as we understand that he is not so much talking about hating our immediate kin, but rather extending our understanding of family to align with God's definition of family, in which every man, woman and child is equal and precious in God's sight. It is not that the woman or the shepherd don't care about the sheep and coins that don't go missing, but rather that they can't bear to lose a single sheep or coin. And so perhaps in this passage today, Christ is not saying we should hate or denounce our biological family, but rather he is urging us to extend the privilege of belonging to family to others. Certainly this is consonant with his teaching elsewhere when he declares that “my mother and my brothers and sisters are those who hear the word of God and do it”. And there is, of course, another powerful example of extending family ties in John's Gospel, when Jesus, addressing Mary and the disciple he loved from the cross says, “Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother.”

So we begin to recognise that Jesus is not so not much seeking to abolish families but rather to transform our understanding of what it means to be part of God's family. Jesus came to teach us by example, to teach us to love others by showing that God's love is for all. God's grace is freely given but we cannot receive it and remain unchanged. Jesus' message was urgent and so his teaching is strong. In our Gospel this morning, he is already on his way to Jerusalem, he is clear that there is a cost to being a disciple; it's not an easy path to tread. We see this in the lives of his first

disciples, many of whom literally dropped everything – livelihoods, homes and families, to follow him.

Jesus goes on to give examples – of the folly of someone building a tower without first ensuring they have sufficient resources or taking on an army many times larger than their own. I was very struck when first reading these two passages we've heard, by how relevant they are to our world today. You don't have to look too far to think of someone who has already built more than one tower but has famously pledged to build a very large and controversial wall, without as yet, the means to pay for it.

And whatever your views or hopes regarding Brexit, the unprecedented and ongoing developments in Parliament and beyond, almost too fast for us to keep up with, highlight the folly of holding a referendum with no plan whatsoever as to how to orchestrate our exit from the EU.

It seems that more frequently in our national and in our world politics, we are coming up against examples of actions that may be legal but seem to many to be morally or ethically questionable, or simply downright unjust.

It may seem strange to suggest that we might be better off with St Paul in charge, but as the passage from his letter to Philemon demonstrates (and that passage is very much the bulk of the letter), although he often gets a bad rap, he could be a very skilled negotiator and mediator. Indeed, one Biblical commentator describes this as "the most human [letter] in the Christian scriptures" and another as "a model of pastoral care: loving, thoughtful, diplomatic, and carefully theological". Paul is writing from prison, regarding Onesimus – a name which means 'helpful'. Onesimus was a slave who belonged to Philemon, who was a wealthy man, with a house was large enough to accommodate a church congregation. Onesimus has run away, due to an unspecified misdemeanour, and has gone to

Paul and has become a Christian. It was also through Paul that Philemon has become a Christian.

In the letter, Paul is urging Philemon to accept Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a brother – an equal in the faith. But Paul is very clear that this is an appeal to his better nature, and not an order. In reminding Philemon that he is writing from prison, Paul seeks to remind Philemon of the cost of discipleship. Paul also stresses the importance of the relationship he has with Philemon. As the person who brought him to faith, Paul is in some ways his superior, his father in faith, and yet he refers to him rather as a partner and as a brother.

Paul is asking Philemon to consider the cost of being a disciple – a cost that involves giving up some of his social and economic status in welcoming back Onesimus and receiving him as an equal, a beloved brother in Christ. First Paul is clear to point out that he will repay anything that Onesimus owes Philemon. But it is still, in the context and culture of the day, a very big ask for Philemon to not only forgive Onesimus but to welcome him home with open arms as an equal.

However, there is a rather large sticking point here which we cannot overlook – the issue of human slavery. Because at no point does Paul condemn the practice of slavery. His appeal to Philemon is to treat Onesimus as an equal because they are brothers in Christ, because (as we read in Galatians) "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Some have suggested that Paul believed that the second coming of Christ was so close that Christ would sort that problem out, but even so, to us it still sounds rather distasteful.

In his work, *Theology in America*, E Brooks Holifield's writes of how the Bible was invoked - including this passage - by both

proslavery and antislavery advocates: “The debate over slavery would introduce American readers to critical questions about history, doctrinal development, and hermeneutics. It compelled some theologians to recognize that they had to choose between biblical literalism and a form of interpretation that took into account historical criticism, the social and cultural context of the biblical writings, diversity and development within the canon, and the force of presuppositions in biblical scholarship.”

We’ve seen similar developments in the Anglican communion with regard to the ordination and more recently the episcopacy of women and many of us continue to pray that it is only a matter of time before such considerations are also brought to bear on the church’s treatment and attitude to sexuality.

Speaking very personally, there have been times when I’ve been rightly proud when the Church has led the way in human rights and encouraged the secular world to follow. And yet I’ve found it a source of deep sadness and indeed shame that in terms of same sex marriage, something which is legal in the eyes of the state is not allowed in church law. But there’s probably a whole other sermon there. So back to the Bible and the issue of language.

As you can imagine, I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting as I prepare to move on after very nearly 14 years, and some reminiscing too. I’ve been remembering especially some of the language that first attracted me in that job advert. I’d been looking for quite some time at job adverts in the Church Times for priests, and quite a number had sounded okay to begin with, but the further down I got, something just wasn’t quite right, and then sure enough, you’d get to the very bottom and see that one or all of Resolutions A,B and C had been passed. Those of course,

are basically the resolutions that say a church does not want a woman priest.

And then I came to the advert put together by St James’s Piccadilly. I hadn’t heard of St James’s Piccadilly and it was in the middle of London, so I wasn’t very sure. But, the language didn’t so much grab me by the throat as by the heart, and I got more and more keen and intrigued the further down I got, and then, blow me, at the end there was nothing about resolutions, but it actually said, ‘to balance the gender of our clergy team, we would particularly welcome applications from women priests.’ I’d never seen that in print before. I was very intrigued. And I was also very struck by some wording on the website, which is still there today. It says: *“We seek to be an inclusive congregation, welcoming of both human experience and human diversity. We take the Bible seriously, and seek to understand it in the light of that same experience and diversity, and of what this age knows and Biblical writers did not, and could not, know.”*

There’s so much I’ve valued here and plenty of time for goodbyes next week, but I do want to acknowledge just how much I’ve enjoyed and benefitted from the ways in which - to coin a term from Lucy - we’ve ‘grappled with the Bible together’, seeking deeper understanding and meaning for our lives - particularly with those passages we find difficult and challenging. And I’ve greatly enjoyed listening to, and learning from, my colleagues’ sermons. That’s a particular highlight of being on the clergy team here; you don’t always have to listen to yourself, but you get inspiration and stimulus from others.

And so I close with a prayer by Walter Brueggemann, which seems to speak especially powerfully to us and our nation at this time:

When the world spins crazy,
spins wild and out of control
spins toward rage and hate and violence,
spins beyond our wisdom and nearly
beyond our faith,
When the world spins to chaos as it does now among us . . .
We are glad for sobering roots that provide ballast in the storm.
So we thank you for our rootage in communities of faith,
for many fathers and mothers
who have believed and trusted
as firm witnesses to us,
for their many stories of wonder, awe, and healing.
We are glad this night in this company
for the rootage of the text,
for its daring testimony,
for its deep commands,
for its exuberant tales.
Because we know that as we probe deep into this text . . .
clear to its bottom,
we will find you hiding there,
we will find you showing yourself there,
speaking as you do,
governing,
healing,
judging.
And when we meet you hiddenly,
we find the spin not so unnerving,
because from you the world again has a chance
for life and sense and wholeness.
We pray midst the spinning, not yet unnerved,
but waiting and watching and listening,
for you are the truth that contains all our spin. Amen.

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