

Sermon Trinity 13 2019 Deut 30:15-end; Philemon 1; Luke 14:25-33

I imagine we're all familiar with warnings such as: Have you read the small print? Have you ticked the box to agree to the conditions? Do you really understand the terms of the contract and what is involved?..... These are some of the things we're required to consider before we agree to buy or join almost anything these days.

Signing up to Jesus is no different as we discover in this reading from Luke. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem surrounded by crowds of people who consider Him to be a winner. They follow Him, almost without question, so that they too might get a taste of the glory and popularity that surround Him.

In contrast to their high expectations, Jesus is endeavouring to teach them that discipleship carries a high price tag. Far from the crown that they envisage, the road to Jerusalem will end with the cross. Those who aspire to follow Jesus need to count the cost before signing on the dotted line..... They need to be ready for the long haul, to be well prepared and weigh up the commitment, to decide carefully if they can stay to the bitter end.

It is so easy to tell people about the benefits of being a Christian –perfect love, forgiveness of sins, the belief in a God who walks with us and listens to us, someone who is always accessible and with whom we can have a real relationship. The hope of everlasting life in God's presence when we die, in a new life free from sorrow and suffering. Preaching like that is uplifting and hopefully brings comfort to those who listen.

BUT what about today's reading –how would you feel if I said 'You have to hate your family to be a Christian!' ... **AND** how would I feel saying it?
What did Jesus really mean?

Semitic hyperbole or exaggeration for effect was a common Old Testament idea and we find similar passages in Deuteronomy, Samuel, Proverbs & so on. In the original Greek - 'hate' is similar to 'turn your back on'. We can hate a sin but still do it, if we turn our back on something it is banished from our sight.

I looked up the King James version of this passage and found that 'hate' is used there too! But that shouldn't have been a surprise as it is usually the more modern Bible translations that couch difficult verses in more gentle language. In some Bibles, phrases like 'disregard' or 'refuse to let go' or 'love me more than family and self' are used instead of 'hate'. Would I rather have read that?

So here I am, falling into the trap of trying to make Jesus' challenges easier to accept. Why? Is it for my sake or yours? ...

Is it because Godfrey would like to find you here again next week?

Is it because I'm afraid of saying what Jesus really meant?

When so much of Jesus' ministry was based on loving others this does seem a big contradiction. What did Jesus really mean?

Anything worthwhile requires some sort of sacrifice. Being an A-student, a top athlete or musician all demand hours of dedication. It means making choices – do I skip studying or training to go out with my mates or do I risk ridicule when I put commitment first?

Jesus demands commitment. Our reading last week which brought to an end several weeks in which we followed the Letter to the Hebrews spoke of ...

'Service well pleasing to God' ... and listed a number of things that might be considered rather old-fashioned today – sacrifice, obedience, fidelity.

Jesus doesn't make discipleship sound easy. He never tried to disguise the cost BUT neither does He ask for anything that He himself isn't willing to give.

Jesus knows what awaits Him as he goes towards Jerusalem.

He wants to ensure that those who follow Him also know the cost of staying the course- so He gives two metaphors to explain the reality of discipleship: a builder and an invader. They are examples that make a lot of sense today too. They involve foresight, preparation, realism, careful planning. We are advised that if we don't, we are likely to fail and it will be obvious to everyone if we do.

Jesus knew He was speaking to people who thought He was a conquering hero. They followed Him because they thought He could restore Israel and drive out the Romans. They thought He would be a great king and soldier, much like David. They were ready to join His victory parade but Jesus was warning them that it wasn't going to be like that.As we know, not many years later, new converts were crucified and Paul wrote many of his letters from prison.

But REALLY how difficult is it for US today? We're certainly not risking our lives or our freedom here in Surrey when we follow Jesus! In our safe and comfortable faith I find myself regularly praying for people who are persecuted for upholding their beliefs. I marvel at their courage and question whether I would be as faithful? Every day many people who follow Christ are led into difficult and dangerous places – our military chaplains, those whose ministry takes them to inner-city unrest and violence.

But our faith does challenge us in ways that perhaps we haven't thought about. Have we considered those very solemn marriage vows many of us made and our children or grandchildren may make? They are demanding, they speak about sickness and death in the midst of a very joyous occasion. They clearly challenge us to count the cost before embarking on a lifetime of commitment. They ask us to put ourselves last when times get difficult.

If we are a godparent we promise to pray for our godchild. As clergy we promise to pray every day --well chatting to God is easy but how often does my diary allow time 'to be' and listen to that still small voice speaking to me? Our young families have to make difficult choices when so many activities take place on a Sunday morning. How do we balance the importance and joy of praising God, with the honour of playing in a team or rehearsing for a play?

In our OT reading, Moses challenged the people to choose life, to obey God and therefore continue to experience His blessings. Thousands of years ago God gave the people a choice and He gives us that same choice today. God didn't pretend that it wasn't a hard choice, Jesus didn't pretend that it wasn't a hard choice and when Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, he didn't pretend either.

Onesimus was a slave who belonged to Philemon. Somehow, he met Paul who led him to Christ and convinced him that running away from his problems wouldn't solve them. Paul writes this letter asking Philemon to take him back. We might wonder why this short and seemingly unimportant letter is included in the Bible and in our readings today?

As an elder and an apostle, Paul could have just ordered Philemon but he based his request on Philemon's Christian commitment. He wanted Philemon to make the right choice, the Christian choice. He urged Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother not as a piece of property. It is also a picture of salvation – of a person who ran away but is brought back forgiven and useful and received once again into the family. Paul was doing for the slave what Jesus had done for him personally ... what Jesus has done for each one of us.

He was saying to Onesimus 'Jesus has paid a price for you and rescued you, He has remade you and sent you back of your own free will to serve God. Now you go and do that to others.' In other words, we are to accept - as we are accepted; to show mercy - as we have received mercy; and to love - as we are loved. We have received the Grace of God and we are called to pass on that Grace as part of our commitment to Christ. Amen.

