

## **Pentecost 15, September 9, 2007. Wesley 9.00 & 10.30: Elizabeth Richardson**

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What does it cost?

Do you ask that sort of question when you see something you want? When I read a review of a new car that looks good, one of the first things I want to know is, could I afford it if I were actually in the market for a new car?

When I go to the fruit and vegetable markets, I look at the price of things and quite often decide on the variety or type of fruit or vegetable depending on the price. Some items are just for a treat. Some are out of my price range.

Today's epistle and gospel readings are both about the cost of being a disciple of Jesus the Christ. Luke makes the point that anyone wanting to build a tower – perhaps a tower to look out for thieves in the vineyard – needs first to do the sums. Is there enough money? A half built tower is no good to anyone. In the same way, a person who commits to following Jesus and then gives up when it becomes too expensive is no use to God or anyone.

We know that it cost Jesus his life when he didn't give up on doing God's will. But he lived in a different time and culture. We feel safe from that sort of cost – some other countries might be dangerous for Christians but we're safe.

But what is it that Jesus was saying about hating family? Aren't we supposed to honour our mother and father? The original Greek word, which we translate as "hate", had a number of shades of meaning. Scholars say that Luke was using it in a way that reflected a Semitic word meaning "turn away from" or "detach oneself from". They also say that Luke was exaggerating to make a point.

Families have a powerful effect on our lives and being a Christian means that we have to distance ourselves a bit emotionally from our family. To start with, the initial decision to follow Jesus has to be ours alone. Our family can't make it for us. Like falling in love with another person, our becoming a disciple is the outcome of our individual interaction with Jesus and God. For some people the decision to become a Christian is greeted with joy by family members. For others it might be greeted with disbelief – 'what on earth do you want to do that for?' Sometimes it is greeted with hostility.

Then, having decided to be a Christian, we have to keep on with it. As Hans Kung has said, 'following' Jesus means 'walking behind him', being active. It is not enough to think warm fuzzy thoughts about other people. It is not enough to get stirred up about injustice when we see it, if we then do nothing. We are to walk behind Jesus. And we only know how to walk behind Jesus when we learn what it was that he did and said. Jesus has to become the standard by which we measure our own lives.

That can be uncomfortable to say the least and we can see how it was a challenge to the church from the earliest times. In various stories in the New Testament, we see that the disciples and later followers of Jesus had to really struggle with what they were being asked to do. Jesus had stepped outside the normal polite society. He had eaten with people who were not quite nice. He had broken many of the religious laws when he healed on the Sabbath or touched unclean people. He had upset the religious leaders.

We see how the disciples found all this a bit hard to accept at times. Did they really have to mix with Gentiles? Did they really have to stand their ground when the going got tough? Remember how Peter denied being a friend of Jesus. Remember how some of them went back to Galilee and back to fishing after the crucifixion.

After all, they probably worried about their families. What would happen to the families if the disciples were imprisoned or executed? One has only to see what happens today to the families of outspoken people or activists in some countries, to know that the disciples may well have had good reason to return to their families and keep their heads down.

The German theologian, Wolfgang Schrage, writing on Paul's letter to Philemon, points out how Paul was telling Philemon's community that being Christians changed their whole lives in relation to the rest of society. For them, it was no longer possible to have two classes of humans. Christians could not be either saints or slaves. All had to be saints. And that was in a world in which slavery was an integral part. Paul's letter threatened property rights and society but opened up a new and richer way of living.

In Paul's letter to Philemon, he encourages Philemon to act in a way that would have been quite outside the normal behaviour of his friends and relatives. The slave Onesimus had escaped from Philemon. It was against the law for Paul to aid a slave and Philemon had every right to severely punish the slave when he returned. Yet Paul calls on Philemon, in carefully couched phrases, to treat Onesimus as a fellow human being, indeed as a fellow Christian. To treat him with love.

All three of these people had a lot to lose.

- Paul could have been in serious trouble with the law for harbouring an escaped slave. So he had to be very careful in the way he wrote.
- Paul was offering to pay out a substantial sum of money.
- Onesimus could have been severely punished – even to death.
- Philemon stood to lose face with his friends and neighbours as well as losing financially. He had paid money for Onesimus whom he then owned.

It is interesting to note that Paul was not trying to end slavery as a practice. In his day, slavery was a normal part of the economy and it was not seen as being immoral. Nevertheless, Paul did point out that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus had changed because the two men were now both Christians. As Christians, they had to be treated with love and as fellow followers of Christ. That in itself must have been quite a challenge for Philemon. Remember too that Paul had written the letter as not just a letter to Philemon but also as an open letter to the Christian community of which Philemon was a member. So Paul was putting the moral challenge not just to Philemon but also to the whole community. It was saying that not only Philemon should treat Onesimus as a fellow Christian but that the whole community should embrace Onesimus as one of them. The letter survived and presumably that was because Philemon did as Paul requested.

Imagine what a powerful effect that letter and the decision of Philemon to do as Paul requested must have had on the community. One or two might have been fearful of the consequences in the society at large. Wealthy, slave owning members could have felt threatened. But when it all worked out it must have been a very emotional time! The letter

was so important to the community that they kept and copied it until it finally became part of the canon of the New Testament.

There are other ways in which we, today, may have to face up to difficult situations because we are Christian. Whistleblowers drawing attention to some serious injustice frequently suffer considerably from others who have not wanted to be shown up for wrongdoing. The cost of their actions can be high indeed.

Then there are the ways in which being a Christian might cause us to lead a life that is not the one our family wants.

Consider the doctor or teacher or other professional who sees a need for their services in a poor area of a large city or in a country town. They may feel a strong call from God to leave the comfort of a familiar place where there is the support of family, to go where the need is great. They are turning away from their family in order to be disciples of Jesus.

Or perhaps it is a matter of lifestyle. How does the family react if one feels called by God to give a sizeable proportion of one's income to the poor and needy? To give so much money that the family has to do without the latest gadgets and the bigger home. You may think that your money is being put to better use by contributing to housing, education and health services for the needy, but the family feels hard done by.

These are some of what Jesus means by 'hating' or detaching oneself from family.

Being a true disciple of Jesus demands the kind of living that does not really fit in with the goals of the rest of society. As Joan Chittister says "People with a high need for approval, social status, and public respectability need not apply". Just as Jesus "was a healer and prophet, voice and heart, call and sign of the God whose design for this world is justice and love", so today's disciples are also called. We are called to help others, to speak up for the weak and disadvantaged and to model the kind of life that God wants all to live. That is costly. It is hard and it can mean that one has to be prepared to leave family behind. This doesn't mean that we stop loving our families, but we don't stay enclosed in the family circle. For many, being a Christian leads to new friends and new situations which enrich one's life enormously.

Sometimes being a Christian means speaking up against the powerful in a country. Sometimes it means telling the government that it needs to change direction. When the leaders of our church write or speak publicly about issues of justice, then we should be proud that it is the church of which we are a member, that is taking a stand. We need to be prepared to give our support. And we need to continue to give support no matter how much ridicule or abuse is directed at the churches. Perhaps we can take some comfort that, in the long run, people respect those who take a moral stand while those who fail to take a moral stand are criticized. It is common these days to see very disparaging remarks made about some of the European church leaders of the 1930's and 1940's - those who failed to speak out against the atrocities that were happening under the Nazis. On the other hand, society at large now recognises the work of those Christians who campaigned to end slavery and numerous other unjust practices.

To end with another quote from Joan Chittister: "Discipleship is an attitude of mind, a quality of soul, a way of living that is not political but which has serious political

implications, ... Discipleship changes things because it simply cannot ignore things as they are" ... "True discipleship takes the side always, always, always of the poor despite the power of the rich – not because the poor are more virtuous than the rich but because the God of love wills for them what the rich ignore for them".

Discipleship is costly. The rewards are great. Have each one of us counted the cost? Can we afford it? Can we afford **not** to dedicate our lives to following Jesus? Amen.