

Pentecost 16 – 9am Wesley Worship – 4th September 2016

Theme: “Costly discipleship”

Reading: Luke 14: 25-35

Text: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And if anyone does not carry his/her cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Vss 26/7

Introduction

How many of us occasionally have a ‘bad day’ – we get up grumpy and we stay grumpy and the day simply goes ‘downhill from there’.

It’s as though Jesus was having one of those days with his opening words to the ‘large crowds’ who were travelling with him.

If we were to change our welcome signs on the front corner of the church boundary from ‘Everyone is welcome here’ to ‘Only those who hate their families and carry a huge cross are welcome here’ I wonder how many extras we might get in off the streets? We might get a few curious people wondering ‘what the heck is happening at Wesley’ but I doubt if we would get any new genuine followers of Jesus.

There are relatively regular times when I get people saying to me, ‘thanks for the sermon or the prayers – they have been special for me or I’ve been challenged or learnt from what you said today.’ Not very often that I’ve had it said to me ‘You were abusive, off-putting and faith destroying today, David’, but this appears to be what Jesus is doing here. So let’s take a closer look at this passage and try to make some sense of it both in its setting back then and its relevance for today.

Reflection on Luke 14: 25-35

This is a hard passage both for the people back then as well as for us today. It is evident that Jesus was becoming a popular figure and the ‘large crowds’ travelling with him reflected that popularity. Now whether Jesus senses that popularity and sees it stemming from misunderstanding by the people, we don’t really know. But here he makes it clear to the people the path they must follow if they are to be his disciples. Some commentators suggest that a portion of the crowds thought Jesus was a populist Messiah that they were expecting who would help the Jewish people rise up against their Roman overlords and would give Israel back its power of the past. There was this huge nationalistic movement afoot and there were those who saw Jesus as the way forward, militaristically.

Yet here Jesus virtually assaults the crowds with a stinger of the sermon and says it emphatically that following him has a huge personal cost. As in many places Jesus overstates what he has to say to make it evident that following him is ‘costly’ to the point of separating your blood ties to family with your faith ties to God through Christ. The loyalty and love to family has to be put to one side as you follow Jesus and this may well cause conflict and separation with your family. In Jesus’ day, family was the priority. In a sense you couldn’t live without the close blood ties that bound you to community. Hence his words here have a huge impact – suddenly people need to re-orient their whole being and prioritise their way of living that may well change their family dynamics.

In a sense this is still true today. For me, following Jesus meant that I didn't take on my father's business, I didn't follow my dream of becoming a vet, but rather followed Christ's calling that led to theological training, parishes around Australia and time overseas separated from family with military chaplaincy service. Becoming a Christian and following, hopefully faithfully Jesus, has completely changed my life. Probably I'd still be in South Australia, doing something else if I hadn't made a commitment to Christ at the tender age of 18. My spiritual journeying has taken me to many parts of Australia and the world that I never would have dreamed likely had I not accepted Christ's faith challenge. It changed the priorities of life for me and some of those changes were indeed difficult – costly discipleship. We tend to think that following Jesus means that life will be easier, somehow blessed, and the difficulties of life will simply disappear, as if by magic. We preachers are at fault at this point because we have not been faithful to what Christ says about discipleship – it is a hard and uncompromising road, but the benefits are eternal!!

Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus had mentioned the following words:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Luke 9:23

Already Jesus has told the disciples about costly discipleship which requires self-denial, complete dedication and willing obedience. The disciples from Galilee knew what the cross meant for hundreds of men had been executed by the Romans by this means for insurrection. Now Jesus shares this message with the wider followers. I wonder how many then decided not to follow Jesus? We have no record of this but after these vehement words I'm sure there were less in the crowds as they realised what was in store for them.

Jesus then goes on to use analogies initially about building costs and then of military conflict of one nation against another. In both instances the costs are central to the analogies. The first is that you need to have the money to finish the building else it ends up as an incomplete structure and you look foolish. In the second one you need to know whether you have the military might to succeed else you need to negotiate a peace.

Jesus uses these analogies then to say it is the same with being my disciple, literally one under the discipline of Christ, if it doesn't 'stack up', if you can't make that costly decision, then you can't be 'my disciple'.

The final analogy is that of salt losing its saltiness – it becomes useless and is thrown out. So it is, implies Jesus, with the follower who has failed to count the cost of being a true disciple of Christ.

Strong teaching by Jesus both for his time and our time.

Reflection

What may costly discipleship look like for us today?

I read this little story which has a barb within it as I read around this passage in different places:

'I've had a miserable, hellish week,' she said to me as she exited the church after the service. 'Oh I'm sorry,' I said. 'I hope that you received some help and encouragement through the worship today' I responded. 'Not particularly' she stated. 'I came here with my agenda and between you and Jesus I leave more troubled wondering why my prayers haven't been answered and I've been challenged to look further at my discipleship and how to care for others. I'm not too sure about this Christian faith for me.'

So it may be for many of us – we leave with more questions than answers and I think that is the way of Jesus – unsettling us to look at our faith and to live it out.

Let us pray

Lord, give us the grace to listen to you, to receive what you have to say to us, even when what we hear is not what we want to hear and when what you say to us is hard to hear.

Forgive our determination to put our words into your mouth. We repent of our desire to control the conversation between you and us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, give us the courage to risk listening to you, to dare to let you call our names and summon us to more adventurous discipleship. Enable us to count the cost of following you and then give us bold willingness to pay the price. Amen.