

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, 4th September 2022.

Philemon 1-21
Luke 14: 25-33

Our readings today present us with a challenge - and at first sight quite a hostile challenge at that. Certainly they do not present as the first thing that we would reach for in our Bibles when we might be keen to try to encourage someone new to come to Church and dip a toe into the waters of Christian fellowship. We have the very difficult passage from Luke, that is translated as needing to hate our families in order to love God and follow Christ; and we have the curious little vignette of the letter to Philomen, that seems to deal more with the social circumstances around the return of a slave called Onesimus.

It is important to begin with an understanding of where our Gospel reading comes in this sequence of Jesus' teaching. Our Gospel reading is the fourth of a series of uncompromising teachings by Jesus, after he has entered the City of Jerusalem. In the run-up to today's reading, Jesus has variously taught about healing on the Sabbath (all okay and nicely understood, so we can feel alright about that one); then Jesus turns his attention to a banquet where the host puts the desirable guests at the top table and the riff-raff down the end, and is sternly admonished and told to turn it around. Then, Jesus teaches about the dinner party where the invited guests are too busy to come, and send a lot of feeble excuses along the lines that they are too busy arranging their socks to bother coming, or that there is something good on tele that evening, so the poor and the lame are invited instead, and the host says that none who were invited will taste his sumptuous dinner.

So, we have had three uncompromising, tough lessons on how to behave and how not to behave, and had it all brought down to the basic level that: if you have better things to do than eat my dinner that I have prepared for you, then you are not invited.

And then we come to our reading, hating family and all.

The first thing to appreciate is where we begin with this reading. We begin with the narrative scene setting that, "*Now large crowds were travelling with him*". Clearly Jesus of Nazareth is creating quiet a stir, and has become a hit. Jesus is attracting the crowds. All sorts of people are catching on. Lots of people seem to want to get close to what is going on.

Is it then that what is really sensed by Jesus at this point, is that there are an awful lot of potentially fair weather friends who are joining in with the action, but not really understanding the point? As they saying goes, they don't "get it"?

It is a truth of every age that every so often, someone can catch the public imagination and suddenly be a hit - whether it is, at its extremes, torch lit processions for dictators, or the more jolly and fun phenomena such as

Beatlemania; there are the cyclical political highs and lows of Union Jacks and the triumphal entry into Downing Street - that is followed sooner or later (and tomorrow or Tuesday as it happens) by the removal van and a teary farewell; or just someone who - for the moment at least - is the next "*Big Thing*".

Perhaps Jesus needs to make his point firmly and uncompromisingly. To follow Christ is not a fad or a fashion. Christ is not a "Look" or a new diet. Following Christ is not joining a Fan Club. All these sorts of things cost us nothing. There is no commitment or effort required from us, beyond buying the t shirt or waving the little flag that an aide has put into your hand. If it goes wrong it won't cost you. It won't cost you because there is nothing of you in what is going on.

And that is the point. What is going on in following Christ, in seeking Christ in all our well intentioned (but often falling short) ways, is that we are **investing ourselves** into our sense of faith and discipleship. We are investing ourselves. Nobody can say of another that their experience is better or worse than anyone else's, because our relationship with God through Christ is personal.

But it is a relationship.

And relationship is a two way thing. For all my love of the Beatles songs, for all my childhood adoration of Alan Knott (who was England's long-standing wicket keeper of great skill, claim and delightfully idiosyncratic), I did not have a relationship with either John, Paul, George and Ringo, or "Knotty" - as we liked to call him. I was oblivious to all of them. And eventually I grew up and became obsessed with someone else: nothing lost, nothing gained, it was harmless fun - a bit like a crush.

So to this crowd of happy followers who may be thinking, "Well this is fun, this is different, there's something about this man, and I love the way he sticks it to the Authorities," Jesus is saying: **hold on; cool it for a moment**. I am not a fad or a mania - I am for ever and this is fundamental. I am literally life changing, not bedroom wall changing.

The Commentators helpfully throw a bit of life-line out as regards the use of the word hate. In Matthew's Gospel, the same teaching appears but the translation is "love less than" as opposed to hate. If we read it that way, that they love less their parents or their children, we can begin to understand it a little better.

Christ asks of us to be in relationship with him and to know that truly being in a relationship is not a half-hearted thing. Hence we don't start building towers or making war without being committed to the project, and having a sense of what we need to fulfil our objectives. In following Christ we do not need much, apart from an understanding that we should love God, love Christ, at least as much as the things we love the most. Even that is a stretch at times. Sometimes it is more. It costs us.

It costs us when we don't understand why things have gone wrong: when grief is unfairly and untimely visited, when the World - perhaps as now - seems not to heed

God, and we wonder where God is in all of the fighting and the floods, or when we fret for those we love. It can be, it is, a little harder.

But relationships *are* hard. Relationships are not always easy. There are good times, and the less so. But the ones that matter are the ones we persevere at; and Christ asks of us our love and our perseverance.

Let us not then be negatively diverted by this passage from Luke. Perhaps we can see it as something special, albeit given in a fiercely uncompromising way. Be reassured - God is love, and the great commandment that Jesus gives is that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Nobody, Luke included, is saying that we should stop loving our beloved if we are to be a true disciple.

And so to Philemon - perhaps here in the Lectionary is an example of that cost of discipleship. It is a rather endearing letter. It is certainly very personal. Paul is old and Paul is in prison. The Commentators can't tell us quite where, or at what stage, but he is old. He is sending back to Philemon his slave Onesimus. The name means "useful" apparently. (An odd name to choose by which to name someone, but it suits the purpose). There are theories that maybe Onesimus is a runaway slave who fled to Paul from Philemon, and is now being sent back, and Paul is sending a letter of protection to make sure Onesimus is not for the high jump when he gets back.

But whatever has quite gone on before, what matters is what has happened now. Paul loves him as a son, and he is probably indispensable to the elderly Paul in his latest incarceration. Yet Paul is sending him back, because this oddly named slave has become a Christian, and has work to do. Paul gives him up. He is now a beloved brother. In return, Paul encourages Philemon to refresh his own heart: they have work to do.

Well, maybe we are to see a direct link between Paul giving up his quasi-adopted son for the good of others in the faith as an example of hating one's children to follow Christ. But Paul was - it need not be said - a remarkable person in remarkable circumstances. What perhaps is more important is that Paul tells Philemon early in the letter that he prays that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

"The sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ."

If we take up our Cross and follow Christ we know that things are expected of us that will not be expected of others. We are to identify and order our true priorities in terms of our obligations to others, to social justice, to the environment, to truth, and to each other. We are to forgive where others would not countenance it - *and that is costly*. We account for our lives and how we live them.

When we do that good for Christ, our faith becomes effective; when we do that for Christ and others see what we do, then our faith becomes enabling and

aspirational. When we do that, we build the Kingdom on solid ground, and not on the shifting sands of celebrity.

All this is done through the prism of the Cross. All this is done because we walk the way of the Cross. We may falter, we may stumble, but we carry on. That is all that is asked of us: love and persevere. And Jesus knows that sometimes that carries a cost. And we know it too.

We know that those crowds in Jerusalem melted away within a matter of days. We know that those crowds ended up paying for Barrabas' release and Jesus' death. We know - as Christ surely knew - that that crowd was not truly with him and never would be.

So no wonder that Jesus turned around and put it all in front of them as strongly as he did.

So, far from turning people off from Christ, we can take heart that in the Gospel we are taught that following Christ is a relationship, for all of us, individually, in our funny and private ways, in the true way that matters so deeply, so personally, and so fundamentally.

After all, Christ's cross led him willingly to Calvary, despite the agony, and despite the cost, on behalf of us all.

And that is love.

Amen

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