

## Trinity 15 Weighing the cost of discipleship

In Luke's gospel, following the account of the Transfiguration in chapter 9, Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Jerusalem. Luke 9 v.51; "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." On this journey, between the Transfiguration and the Passion, the scripture introduces the disciples – and by extension, us too – to what discipleship is really all about. Chapter 10 gives us the story of the Good Samaritan, chapter 12 the Rich Fool and the Faithful and Unfaithful Slaves, chapter 13 the Narrow Door and last week we had in chapter 14 the call to hospitality, followed by the Great Dinner, also about hospitable outreach. All along this way, there are key messages, therefore, pointing us towards the kind of commitments and values that discipleship will entail: the necessity for compassion, the worthiness of the other, the lure of wealth, the value of watchfulness, the expectations we should have of the journey. Today, in our verses towards the end of chapter 14, we are confronted, squarely, with the sobering matter of the cost of discipleship: "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." As if this isn't enough, Jesus closes his words to the crowd saying, "so therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." The point is simple, following in Jesus' footsteps means leaving behind all attachments. The heart must find a new home. It must find a new orientation away from attachment to family and to material possessions. When we start to ask ourselves, "what is being meant here?", we might consider Jesus' other words, that, "whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple." The image of carrying the cross, connects us indeed to that distinctive orientation of Christian discipleship which is 'the way of suffering love', where, arguably, neither material things nor familial allegiance matter anymore. It is wholly absorbing and will claim our prior attention. We should also remind ourselves, however, that this is a way of salvation: that when we tread this path, Christ can truly use us, as his hands and his feet, at his service in the world. And

perhaps the truth is that unless we have let go of all else, we can't give ourselves in this way.

When setting out the cost of discipleship, Jesus pictures the would-be disciple as someone who is serious about what may be entailed. What is interesting, is that he suggests that the decision to follow or not to follow is not one to make on impulse. Rather, he envisages the putative disciple weighing their decision. He conjectures that it is like considering the building of a tower. Does one not first sit down and estimate the cost, in case there might not be the resources to complete it? Or it's like a king going to war. If the chances of victory are too slight, should one not avoid a conflict and sue for peace? The decision to be a disciple, or to go on being a disciple, is not one to take lightly, without due consideration. The impact of these comparisons is, of course, to make the hearers stop and think – to make us stop and think – are we giving sufficient thought to our commitment, are we really up for what may be involved, are we too invested in distractions and if so what are they, and to what extent do we embrace the carrying of the cross. And to what extent do we see the way of suffering love as the heart of true discipleship? These are the natural questions that arise..... Whereas this scripture is urging the would-be disciple to be both thoughtful and knowing, my hunch, however, is that in decisions of faith commitment, the battle is won or lost long before it is fought, because for the most part we made that decision long ago. What is happening through the rhetorical nature of the text is that we are being invited to rehearse that decision and give it fresh consideration and fresh energy.

Recently I read the novel by Tracy Chevalier 'The Lady and the Unicorn'. In it a family of weavers in Brussels must decide whether to undertake a contract to weave a tapestry for a wealthy client. They must weigh the cost. As it turns out they have no choice but to say 'yes' despite the fact that they will make little money and can scarcely hope to complete the work in the time requested. The problem is that the purchaser's agent is

aware that they have broken the strict rules of the Weavers Guild, and should this come to light they will be fined heavily and could be ruined. They are cornered into undertaking the work. The decision is made for them. What then happens is that in order to complete the tapestry on time they have to take unforeseen steps. They have to employ two additional workers from outside the family, meaning extra cost, the head weaver's wife has to join the others on the loom against accepted practice (as women cannot weave), their daughter also has to work night after night, through the night, to do the finishing stitching. What strikes me is that the weaving of the tapestry is not unlike the commitment of faith; that it's more in the challenges of the journey (the making of the tapestry) that we discover what we are willing to give, to risk or to sacrifice, and less by virtue of any decision we once made; that it's in the living out of these challenges that we come to understand whether the decision to commit was warranted and we would do it again and will stay the course.

Our passage suggests that when it comes to embracing costly discipleship, the two things that are most likely to stand in the way are possessions and relationships – probably the two things we cherish most in one form or another. As people who do not live in a world in which the imminent return of Christ is anticipated, the demands to hate the people we are attached to and to give up all our possessions are puzzling, not to say counter-cultural. I think the prayer that makes most sense as we try to be true to our calling is one that is based on the picture of God in Jeremiah chapter 18 as the potter. Here God as the potter is both creator and sustainer and judge; for the re-fashioning of the pot may as likely be to dispense with an unworthy vessel as to craft a worthy one. The point is that we are in the potter's hands, and we must trust that we will indeed be crafted into worthy servants and witnesses, whether by fierce pruning or gentle watering. We pray that in this way, we may be empowered to bear willingly the cost of discipleship.

1170 Words

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