

Sermon: The Cost of being a Disciple

What a curious mix we find in the person of Jesus.

He had an enormously attractive personality. The first words of our Gospel reading testify to that fact: "Large crowds were travelling with Jesus". He spoke with authority, he performed miracles. He was a man who exuded compassion and love. It was inevitable that large crowds would follow him. And yet, when Jesus sat down to teach these large crowds, quite often, they would have been shocked by what they heard because the message that Jesus brought to them would not have been easy to stomach.

Never more so than on this occasion. The crowd had gathered eagerly to receive the teaching of Jesus. And he then gives them 3 'can not's':

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters cannot be my disciple."

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

"If you do not give up your possessions, you cannot be my disciple."

It doesn't get much harder than that, does it? It seems a strange way to build a religious movement. Most would surely be attracted by the benefits rather than being confronted by the cost. And let us all be perfectly honest, have we or are we willing to follow those 3 'can not's'?

So, what are we to make of these 3 'can not's' and why are they so central to the nature of discipleship?

In verse 25, we are told, "Large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them..." This is an interesting verse because it indicates to us that it is those who were already following Jesus who needed to be taught the nature of true discipleship. These were not people who were opposed to Jesus' ministry. These people were interested enough to be following him already. But, even then, it seems that they hadn't fully grasped the implications of discipleship.

The same is true for many today, of course. Churches throughout the world are packed with people interested in Jesus but who don't really grasp the implications of discipleship for themselves. And it is people like these that Jesus was speaking here. Here were people willing to follow Jesus and learn from him if the cost wasn't too high. They were, if you like, casual followers.

But Jesus points out that this is a total misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian and speaks very strongly about this misunderstanding. His teaching here is not just for truly spiritual Christians as if there are two divisions of discipleship, (which is a misunderstanding we commonly come across).

It isn't as if the ordinary, average person in the pew can somehow be a casual follower while leaving the passionate, disciplined lifestyle to the professional Christians and a few others who are prepared to take it all very seriously.

No, this is a call to living for each one of us, as Jesus makes clear in verse 26: "Whoever comes to me..." That is every one of us being addressed here.

And so, he gives us the first of his 'can not's': "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."

For our use in our world today, we need to put this verse into its original 1st-century Palestine context. Otherwise, we might misunderstand Jesus' intent here. Jesus was speaking in Aramaic and his use of the word 'hate' is an overstatement. He was not actually calling us to hate our relatives and hate our life. In Jewish culture, the Rabbis would use the word 'hate' to indicate a lesser love. So, Jesus is saying that we need to love him more than we love our relatives and our own lives. I am sure we are all relieved with that explanation.

And this isn't a statement about emotions – how we feel: it's a statement about our commitment to obey. We are to put Jesus first, put our love for God above everything else in our lives. Our obedience to the person of Jesus Christ must inform all other decisions we make regarding the rest of our lives and our relationships with other people.

In all things, Jesus is our priority. He comes before all other relationships; he comes before our personal desires. He comes before our dreams and ambitions. He comes before our own plans.

And the sacrificial nature of this call to discipleship is re-emphasised in verse 27 with Jesus' second 'cannot': "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple".

This saying would have been enough to make the large crowd gasp in horror. Most of them would have seen criminals carrying their crosses on the way to execution in humiliation and shame. Why would anyone choose that for them self? There was no turning back from that.

So, Jesus uses this as a metaphor for saying a final 'goodbye' to all our desires and ambitions if we choose to follow him.

It has been said, "Many come following Jesus who love his heavenly kingdom but few come looking forward to suffering. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in humiliation to the cross."

How true that is for us too. We admire Jesus, we admire his teaching, we glory in his love for us. But we are far more restrained to accept the humiliation of the cross for ourselves. But that is what is demanded of us.

And so, Jesus switches to an illustration about planning to build a tower and counting the cost before we do so. Or a king preparing to wage war against an enemy but first reckoning on the strength of his own troops

before committing himself. In the same way, we are to reckon the cost, count the cost before committing ourselves to a life of discipleship.

Blind commitment that expects only blessings is of no use to God: he wants disciples who are committed and prepared to live sacrificially for him. Jesus wasn't impressed by large crowds.

It is easy to join the crowd, or come to church, when things are going well. But the test of true discipleship is how we respond in times that are tough and whether we can obey God, even when the cost to us is high.

And so, Jesus comes to his third 'cannot' in verse 33: "You cannot become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions".

We want something at the end of this reading to soften the blow, but there is nothing: just a stark truth:

The Christian life demands strength to love.

The Christian life demands that we carry a cross.

The Christian life demands that we give up everything for God.

Again, surely this is just too much to ask! Are we to give up our ambitions, our dreams? Are we to give up our security? Are we to give up our finances, our time? Are we to give up our right to life?

Has there ever been anyone who has done this to perfection? Of course there is: Jesus Christ.

And so, he becomes our model. Growth in discipleship is ultimately growth in the Imitation of Christ: becoming more Christlike in our thoughts and actions. And that involves sacrifice and hard work.

Are we ready to count the cost and become the disciples that Jesus wants us to be? It is a choice that each one of us needs to make.

This passage tells us that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is costly. It is not for the faint of heart. A lot of people will follow Jesus, for a while. A lot of people will say they are his disciples, for a while. A lot of people will be a part of Jesus' church, for a while, until something happens, or it becomes inconvenient, or it becomes too costly for them to be with Jesus.

It is not the large number of people who follow Christ for a while, but the smaller, committed group who remains. Which ones are we?

What Jesus said in this passage described complete commitment to him. We must be totally committed to Jesus to be his disciples. We must love him more than anyone else and we must surrender all, including our very lives, to him.

That is the cost of being a disciple. That is what it means to follow Christ. Can we say that we are fully committed to Jesus Christ? I think we can.
Amen