

There are times when reading the Bible can be a very enjoyable experience; there are times when reading the Bible can be a very inspiring experience; there are times when reading the Bible can be a very tedious experience; and there are other times when you are reading the Bible you come across a passage which at first sight seems incredibly challenging, even actually quite hard to believe what it is that you're reading, and I would put this morning's gospel reading into that last category.

There has been much discussion over the years about how much of the Bible we should take literally. In the past there has been much discussion using texts from the Bible as to for example whether women should be ordained, and these days there is similarly much discussion about human sexuality with different people come up with different conclusions in that area based on their interpretation of the Bible. I'm not going to go into that area today - hopefully many of you will be able to join the living in love and faith discussions that are going to be held in the Deanery at some point in the next few months. But what I do want to do is using the gospel reading this morning I want us to understand what we should and what we shouldn't take literally in the case of this passage of the Bible - but at the same time, if we find ways of perhaps making those parts of the reading which we find unacceptable, more acceptable to us, we at the same time don't in anyway water down the message that is included in that passage. So let's have a look at this morning's gospel reading which is all about the cost of discipleship.

If after hearing the gospel reading you were to ask the question, "what is the cost of discipleship", you may well come up with three answers and I would suggest those answers are relationships, your own life, and then everything. So let's look at each one of those in turn.

"Now large crowds were travelling with him and he turned and said to them, "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." That was the first two verses of our gospel reading this morning. Just to remind you this whole section of Luke's gospel is following the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem where he knows he is going to be killed and three days later will rise again. He's been doing various things on the way: he's been healing people; he's been teaching his disciples; but now he has turned to the crowd which has been following him and it's a substantial crowd. But surely here, in what Jesus is saying, we are coming across a massive contradiction in his teaching. He appears to be saying that's we should hate our fathers and mothers, yet in other parts of Luke's gospel he says the opposite – in chapter 10 – he says we should love our neighbours, and in chapter 18 he is even more specific when he says we should love our Fathers and Mothers. Surely you can't have it both ways? Jesus is also saying here you should hate your wife and children and your brothers and sisters. Is Jesus really saying we should give up our family life so we could follow him. I hope you will be relieved to hear that is not the case – we are taking these words into our modern language and taking them literally. You see Jesus is using the word hate here in the Old Testament usage of the word. In Genesis we hear of Jacob – Jacob had two wives, Rachel and Leah, and he loved Rachel more than he loved Leah - and we are told "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated he opened her womb." Jacob didn't hate, as we would know hate, Leah, he just loved her less than Rachel.

And again in Malachi, this time talking about Jacob and his brother Esau, God says, "I have loved you. But you say how have you loved us?" Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau." God loved them both – but he loved Esau less.

So we have found a way of understanding this passage by not taking it literally – but do not let that any way diminish the strength of what Jesus is saying. To convert to David language, Jesus is saying, yes, please love your family, your parents, your siblings, your children, but your love for God has to be different, it has to be a greater love, and if you have to pick between God and your family – you must pick God. Gosh, that's tough isn't it.

But this doesn't get any easier when you look at our second answer to what is the cost of discipleship? Your life. OK, so let's again go back to what was happening at the time, and living under Roman rule, life was cheap. The Roman authorities were pretty barbaric and if any opposition needed quelling they would have no hesitation in killing people – and making an example of such people with the awful method of killing someone which was crucifixion. And Jesus knew that some people who were listening to him that day would be killed simply because they said they followed Jesus. And that hasn't stopped today. There are still people killed in parts of the world because they are disciples of Jesus. We are fortunate in this country that that is very unlikely to happen to us today, so perhaps we can consider that this second answer is not so threatening to us. But again, we must not water down what Jesus is saying. And, in David language, what Jesus is saying is that you cannot be a part time disciple of Jesus. Commitment is commitment. If you decide to follow Jesus and become one of his disciples, then that is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. It is the total giving of your life to serving Him.

And then we get to the third answer- Everything! What do we mean by everything? "So therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions." So again – context. Luke wrote his account of Jesus and the early church in 2 parts – a gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts chapter 2 Luke tells us about life among the early believers. "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Jesus and his disciples had shared everything living out of a common purse. The early believers did likewise – but this voluntary approach could only work where the sense of spiritual unity was incredibly active – and when it became less so, issues did arise. So where does that leave us today? Whereas I don't think it is in anyone's interests for us all to pool our resources in this country today – we would simply be seen as weird as indeed some communities have been when they have tried this – but what it is saying is that when our churches have a need, when our parishioners have a need, we must be prepared to do what is necessary to meet that need. It is important that we all contribute what we can to the costs of our mission today – as without that, without people's willingness to tythe their incomes for example, the church cannot resource what it is that God is calling them to do.

So, what does the gospel say to us, the people in the 4 church benefice, on this day, 4th September 2022? I think it is challenging each and every one of us as to what kind of follower of Jesus we want to be. Do we want to be a fan of Jesus? Do we think we are doing enough by admiring the amazing things that this man did during those 3 years of ministry nearly 2,000 years ago? Or do we really want to be one of his modern day disciples? Because if we do, this gospel reading is telling us what we need to do about it. And that is three things?

First, we need to love God more than anyone else – that doesn't mean to say we can't love friends and family as well, but God comes first.

Second, we need to be 24/7 disciples – we are giving all our lives to him – again that doesn't mean to say we can't do anything other than do our church activities, but everything we do must be something that God would approve of.

Third, we must be prepared to give as much of our possessions as is necessary to fund the work we do for God – whether that be running a church, helping those in need locally, or supporting work done in God's name elsewhere.

And none of those are easy – but the rewards are quite amazing. We live with the knowledge that God loves each and every one of us, and when we need help we can call out to him and he will listen. We live with the knowledge that whenever we mess things up and do things wrong, if we go to God and say we are sorry he will forgive us – he doesn't expect us to be perfect; he wants us to try to be perfect, but he

doesn't expect us to succeed. We live with the knowledge that our lives on earth are just the beginning of an eternal life with Jesus, but more than that, that part of our lives that are lived on earth will be better because we are his disciples. Being one of Jesus' disciples is not a restriction on our lives, it is an enhancement to our lives. This is why we have to go out and tell other people about being Jesus' disciples. This is why we have to develop our worship so that more people will say, yes I'd like to come to that and hear more about Jesus. This is why we hold events like Tea and Chat to show people that being a Christian isn't just about going to church and singing hymns, but it is about loving our neighbours. You get the picture. I love being one of Jesus' disciples. I can't imagine what life would be like if I wasn't. I don't want to imagine what life would be like if I wasn't. But it's not easy. There are costs to being a disciple. But when you consider the benefits they are not unreasonable.

Amen.