

Estimating the cost

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Almighty God,
who called you Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn near to you;
through him who was lifted high on the cross,
and reigns with the Holy Spirit.

My text may be found in today's gospel from Luke: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and child, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. (14 v26).

It came as something of a shock to discover a friend of mine did not love his father. In my innocence, I thought that loving your parents was the norm and that 'Brian', a great example of what it was to be a radiant Christian soul, loved his parents. Not so. It turned out as a boy his father had abused him and Brian now found it impossible to think kindly of the man who had mistreated him as a child.

And in today's gospel we hear a text that still has the power to shock: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and child, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.' It is an article of faith that most people most of the time should love their parents; it is an article of faith that most people most of the time should love their wife and their children; it is an

article of faith that whatever you think of sibling rivalry that the default position in family relationships is that brothers and sisters should love each other because as the saying goes, blood should be thicker than water!

So what is Jesus saying when he states such challenging, seemingly outrageous words?

First the context. Jesus has attracted large crowds by who he is, by what he says and by what he does. Not only has he attracted them, they are following him around, a bit like sheep round a shepherd. All too much; all too easy. So Jesus turns and says some pretty hard things about what it takes to be a disciple: about the need to 'hate' everything that we hold dear; that each of us has a personal burden to bear, our individual cross.

Then he tells two parables in parallel: 'Building a tower'; 'Waging a war'. Both have the same message: before you set out to do something, you need to count the cost; you need to estimate what it is required to bring the work to fruition. The first should appeal to any DIY specialist: have you got the money to purchase the materials; have you got the skills to do the job; have you got the time to do it? The second should appeal to anyone interested in military history. Before you set out on a war, can you win it? It seems silly to think we might be led to war in Iraq or Afghanistan if there is not prospect of us winning the war!

So the cost of being a disciple of Jesus is placed impossibly high. Jesus is deliberately trying to provoke the crowd to think about what is required: the

impossible: to hate those we should love. But though I can see what he is trying to do, I don't believe the words can be taken on face value simply because they fly in the face of some fundamental beliefs about families and human relationships which have their most celebrated expression in the fifth commandment – to honour our father and our mother. So what is actually being said underneath is literally shocking? I think we have a figure of speech in which the love of God should be so great, so intense, so all consuming that anything else seems feeble in comparison; that the quality of our love for God should make everything else seem like hatred in comparison. Not easy to understand, not easy to do. but you know and I know that the real things of value cost and real success requires real effort.

So today's gospel makes uncomfortable reading because following Jesus is not comfortable. There is a burden and a cost and that cost is seen in the symbol of the cross which points to the lengths that Jesus is prepared to go to express God's love for us. And what are you prepared to do? What are we prepared to do? And are you prepared to pay the price?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

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H: Sermon 22: Estimating

