

Lent 2

'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.'

Luke 14 v 26

21 2 16

Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness;
grant to all who are admitted
 into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
 that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things that are agreeable to the same.

My text for today's sermon may be found in the gospel according to Luke, chapter 14 and verse 26: *'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.'*

What I love about Christianity is that Jesus manages to sum up our faith, our way of life, succinctly in a couple of sentences. He's being grilled by the opposition: Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians – by priests and scribes and doctors of the law. He's in Jerusalem. It's the week running up to Passover, just prior to his arrest. He's being asked all sorts of test questions and then this genuine question by an unnamed doctor of the law: *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* He said to him, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart*

and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

(Matthew 22 v36 – 40)

I love it: it’s easy to remember; it’s practical to apply. Love God; love people as we love ourselves – a trinity of love in action. So I have real grief with our text today, the second in our Lenten series of hard verses: ‘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.’

The shock comes in the notion that we should actually hate those nearest and dearest to us if we are to be real disciples of Christ. It seems as if Jesus, according to St Luke, is saying here that to be a real, thorough-going Christian who takes our faith seriously that we should hate those we have a duty to love through shared blood and kinship – our family, those closest to us.

Well there are two ways of making sense of what I must admit deeply shocks me, makes me feel truly uncomfortable. The easiest and most comfortable is to say the language is deliberately challenging and provocative because Jesus is asking us to reflect on how much we should in truth love God. Jesus is not being literal but is challenging us to reflect on the fact that our love of God should be paramount in our lives – our priority – and our real and deep and full love of the people closest to us should not be as great as the superlative love we have for God our Father. Okay, I can live with that.

The second is about the true cost of discipleship. Peter once says to Jesus that they have given up everything to follow him (Mark 10 v28) and we know at least Peter was married because, according to Mark (1v30), he had a mother-in-law. Some folk, like priests in the Catholic church, nuns and monks and friars do live celibate lives taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Perhaps, for some Christians, there is the challenge to give up everything like St Anthony and go off and live a life in the desert as an ascetic in order to make spiritual progress by denying what's good in the world for a greater good.

Fortunately, my vocation is not of that order – that degree of self-denial has little appeal to me – thank goodness. But it is open to some though not to all of us – to love God by denying ourselves the pleasures of this world.

But for the majority of us as Christians, I think the challenge of our hard verse today is not in an 'either . . . or' but in a 'both . . . and'. Not loving God and hating our family but loving God through the love of others. Most Christians, who take our faith seriously, believe in a loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we can best show our love for him by the way we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. God-willing, may we do so but, equally, may we have respect for those who sacrifice everything, motivated by a superlative love of God.

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

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's, Dinard
21st February, 2016*

