

BACKGROUND & SERMON: 4 September 2016
(Reading: Luke 14: 25-33)

BACKGROUND

In our society where we always make sure to say the politically correct thing, today's reading sounds quite shocking! Does it mean then that we have to hate the people who are most dear to us, like our mothers, fathers and other relations, in order to be a follower of Jesus?

Well NO - not when we look at this passage from a First Century Mediterranean perspective. Let me explain.

In Jesus' time it was not an honourable thing to leave your father and the rest of the family behind, not to look after them and not to bury them once they were deceased. In Jesus' day everything was either black or white. You either loved or you hated someone. In this regard, hate needs to be understood in the context of "to NOT love". Jesus is making the claim that if they think that family life gets higher priority than their following of Him, then they must think again. To follow Him, means HE gets first priority and it entails sacrifice.

The image of bearing a cross was regarded as a shameful thing to do. Usually only the convicted criminals carried the horizontal beam of the cross to their place of crucifixion in the presence of many bystanders who would spit on them and mock them. So Jesus says YES to follow HIM does not mean GLORY or HONOUR but shame and sacrifice.

The image of the tower can refer to a watchtower that was erected near a vineyard or house to protect it. Again it would have been a shameful thing to start a building project and not finish it because of a lack of material which implies a lack of planning. Jesus is saying that to follow Him, you need to calculate the costs of discipleship.

The image of the king that goes towards battle without planning the combat properly, was most probably a referral to Herod Antipas. Antipas' first wife was the daughter of Aretas, king of Arabia. During a trip to Rome, Antipas lodged with his brother, Herod, and fell in love with Herodias, his brother's

wife. They both divorced their spouses and married each other. As a result, both leaders raised armies and in the ensuing war, Aretas' army defeated Antipas' forces. Everyone blamed Antipas' loss on the fact that he killed John the Baptist.

In this context Jesus is making the point that it will only be foolish to go into battle unprepared. No king will willingly go into battle against an enemy with an army twice the size of his own one. He will calculate the cost, realize that losing his men is worse than losing his honour, and then rather try to negotiate peace for the sake of his soldiers' survival.

To follow Him will mean that they need to be prepared for battle.

In verse 33, Jesus is summarising the whole passage by emphasising that following HIM will mean that He gets first priority!

SERMON

I think the gospel of Luke contains the most direct encounters of Jesus' views on discipleship.

When I read this passage I could not help wondering about my own "calling" as a Minister, especially with regard to my "calling to preach as sole nominee" at Balerno next Sunday.

In December last year I read the Parish profile of Balerno Church and I felt a strange "pull" to apply. I hesitated because I thought that I cannot upset my family life at that moment in time. But then after the date for the applications closed, I almost breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was fine until a few months later when I saw them advertising again for a new Minister. I felt the instant "pull" once again which would not let go of me. I was wrestling again and so many thoughts crossed my mind: what about my family? What about my flock? What about all the people in the Parish? What about the children in the schools and my chaplaincy to them?

I could not decide what to do. So on the day on which the applications closed, I phoned the Interim Moderator and asked him whether I could have a word with the Nomination Committee before I decide to apply. His answer was NO. He said I have to apply first. So I did and submitted an academic CV that did not say a lot about me. I prayed and asked God to please put barriers in place if this is not to be.

So, when the nominations committee asked me two weeks ago to preach as sole nominee, I knew that this time I could not walk away. But I must tell you, this decision was not taken lightly. I had to face all the “costs”. I can identify with Jesus’ words that to follow Him means sacrifice and putting Him first before any other priorities or commitments. And also what it means to be totally dependent on Him.

I do not know what is going to happen next Sunday, whether the congregation of Balerno is going to vote for me to be their next Minister or not. All I know is that I have to rely on Him and to be dependent upon Him for guidance and strength. I also know that I do not have to worry about what will happen to you as my beloved flock. Just like He will look after me, He will look after you. We are safe in HIS hands.

I think this is what Jesus’ words meant. He did not say that we have to hate everyone before we follow Him. No. He simply meant that we NEED to place HIM before any other thing in life. He said in his first sermon: “Do not worry about food and drink, what you are going to wear but focus on the fact that He will take care of all your needs”.

Jesus also said that He will be with all his disciples which means each and every one that wants to follow him, until the end of time.

Although discipleship means sacrifice, calculating the costs and losing everything – it also means a Spirit led life where you do not have to be in charge all the time. Although it is not easy to let go, sometimes we should actually just let go, trusting totally on God.

It reminds me of something that happened to me on our holiday in South Africa. I am scared of creepy crawlies, darkness, tight spaces and water. Well in South Africa three of the above phobias of mine was condensed in one huge flume that actually was built on a mountain slope. Yes - it was tight, full of water and totally covered in darkness. Nehan desperately wanted to go down but he was just as scared as I was. So my dearest beloved wife started bullying me into submission to accompany Nehan down on this scary ride. After several attempts, I decided to just face my worst fears and let go.

Well, apart from the fact that I had to push myself and Nehan all the way down because of not sufficient water pressure, when we reached the plunge

pool, we both were delighted. It taught me such an important lesson. You cannot always have everything in life the easy way. The things that really matter in life, will come at a cost ... and with great sacrifice of yourself. Nehan could, after this ride, do it on his own. I gave him the confidence he needed to overcome his fears while he is still young.

So do not be a fool. Take God's hand this morning and be His disciple...let me repeat again, HIS disciple not a disciple of your own thoughts, needs, wants and prejudices.

And trust HIM to guide you. He always knows better!

Amen