

“Are You Up For It?” – Luke 14:25-33 – Sept 9/07

This reading from Luke’s gospel is a difficult reading, isn’t it? It’s hard to hear, and difficult to understand. At first glance our reading from Luke’s gospel seems to be a call to passionate, emotional discipleship, doesn’t it? This passage is often used – or I prefer to say misused – in exactly that way. It brings to mind images of people struggling in public processions to carry huge crosses, hoping both to emulate Jesus and to be true to this gospel passage. Other images come to mind of people hanging themselves with meat hooks through their skin in order to symbolically “carry the cross.” Generations of monks have hung their self-inflicted isolation on this and related passages, turning away from family and real life. Even today there are untold thousands who make sure that everyone around them knows just what crosses they bear – and surprisingly some of those crosses are even related to their faith!

However, I contend that such displays are not quite what Jesus was talking about when he turned to the crowds following him. Note that these were large crowds – by this point in Luke’s gospel the ministry was by all accounts a success – if numbers of followers are the criteria then Jesus was vastly successful, because he was drawing huge crowds. Jesus turned to speak to the large crowds, but what he had to say was not exactly what you would expect the preacher in a large mega-church to say. Well, on reflection, many of them do preach a message of “count the cost” and “carry the cross” all in one breath, but they’re usually referring to their people making financial sacrifices.

Here, Jesus is not urging the people to follow him but to consider whether they really want to or not. How many preachers have the nerve to say, “come here to church only if you’re serious about your faith – otherwise, go home!” Actually, there are many who do just that, but I think they have a pretty limited concept of what they mean by ‘serious.’ By being serious they usually mean put on the smile, be enthusiastic, ask no questions, contribute lots of money. Here Jesus is also saying “follow me only if you’re serious” but he has quite a different meaning to serious. For Jesus, “if you’re going to be my disciple it’s going to cost you not only everything you have but everything you are.” That’s a tough message!

Now the people in those large crowds must have wondered what on earth he was talking about! We have the insight of living post-Cross, post-Resurrection and so when Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship it has a great deal of meaning for us. However, the original listeners had no idea that the Cross was looming just over the horizon. They were just sailing along in what seemed like the “glory days” – part of a large and emotional following of this ever-more-popular teacher. In many ways it must have seemed like the “in” thing to do to be part of the adulating crowd hanging on his every word, cheering as he challenged – attacked, even – the religious authorities. Some days the whole thing must have taken on a carnival kind of atmosphere, a kind of rock concert gathering of enthusiastic fans.

It was to such a large crowd of followers that Jesus turned and confronted them and dampened their enthusiasm with this startling challenge to surrender everything if they intended to continue to follow them. One note that we need to clear up as we look at what Jesus said is the word “hate” as in “whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother ...” The word translated “hate” here is not the emotion-filled word we experience in the scream “I hate you!” If that was the case, this verse would undo all the calls to love, to understand, to forgive, to care for others especially one’s own family, found throughout both Old and New Testaments. The word “hate” here is a Semitic way of expressing detachment, a turning away from. Hating one’s own life is not a call to self-loathing, to throw one’s body across the doorway and beg the world to trample on it as though it were a doormat. The apostle Paul in Colossians even called such “self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body” as valueless.

So then, what was Jesus calling for from those who would follow him? What would those who would be his disciples be called to do, to give up? I think one significant clue lies in the two parables that Jesus offered as food for thought. The first parable deals with building a tower – presumably a watch tower to keep an eye on crops and livestock, and thus a rural example. The second parable is about as urban as it gets, dealing with the royal decider deciding whether to go to war or not. Two different settings, two different sets of consequences – albeit both of them possibly embarrassing at best. But there is a common element in both these parables, emphasised by the repeating of the exact same phrase: “sit down first and consider ...” You’re already sitting, but do the considering part. This is about as clear a call as one can hear to the cognitive, not the emotional. This is a call to use your head to evaluate whether your heart is running amok. How different is that from the usual emotional interpretation of abandoning all reason along with everything else to follow Jesus?

In so many of the large crowds following Jesus today the call is to let the emotions run rampant, don’t ask any questions just let yourself go and follow Jesus – in the way we tell you, of course. Clean living, enthusiastic participation in emotion-filled worship, the right smile, donating lots of money – these are often the measures of “sacrifice” called for by the big crowds today. But don’t use your head, don’t ask any deep and probing questions.

That’s not what Jesus said – Jesus said “sit down and consider...” Use your head. Ask the tough questions, such as “what does true discipleship look like?” Or, “Am I up for this?” Perhaps even, “What will following Jesus cost me in real terms?” Asking such tough questions will soon bring you to realize that being a disciple of Christ does involve a real cost. Your priorities will shift – instead of asking as the world does, “what’s in it for me?” you will be moved to ask, “what can I offer?” You will come to see that you are called to make that extra effort to love someone who you think is totally unlikeable – and that could even be yourself! You will be giving up not only your material possessions – understanding how temporary those are – but the very foundation of who you are. That is the toughest possession of all – your very self.

This is not as bleak or frightening a demand as it might seem at first. Realize that this is not a clarion call to self-abuse, to self-abasement, a call to monastic poverty. Quite the opposite, this is a call to discover the richness of life in the company of other people, seeing them perhaps for the first time not as competitors, as threats, or as fodder for your own ambitions but to see others as Christ sees you – a child in need of grace, a redeemed person for whom the love of God has been expressed in Christ’s death and resurrection. Sure, there is a heavenly reward for giving up yourself to follow Christ, but I’m sure that those of you who have done so have discovered that the richness of life resulting from your dedication of self is reward enough in the here and now. Yes, following Christ will and does create tensions not only between you and family and between you and friends, but also creates tensions between you and you – within yourself! That is inevitable, and part of the cost to which Jesus refers. But the reward of seeing someone else finally come to understand that they are loved not only by God but by other people and that it’s ok for them to love themselves is more than enough payback for any possessions surrendered.

Yes, there is a huge cost to true discipleship, and Jesus himself cautions us to sit down and consider whether we are ready to pay that cost, to surrender ourselves to God’s will. But Jesus also promises that we will not be on our own to pay that cost – that he will be beside us, and provide us with the Holy Spirit to comfort, sustain, and guide us as we grow in our discipleship. Jesus cautioned us that we need to consider the cost of following him, but he also promised that in return for giving up everything, including and even especially ourselves, that we would in return find life, indeed life abundant.

Do sit down. Do consider the costs of discipleship. Ask yourself, “am I up for it?” But consider also the benefits. The answer should be clear – you are, with Christ as your help.