

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Sermon on Luke 14:25-33

University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

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Yesterday, I received an email from a friend of mine, Terri, who lives in the Umbrian Hills in a villa that my son Jamie and I visited only a bit earlier this year. I quote Terri who has three young children:

“We are at the villa now and have been since the earthquake. It was a little scary because it lasted over 20 seconds. But we got everyone out. There are cracks in all the walls but the engineer said they were superficial. Glass in the windows all fell and broke, which contributed to a sense of panic. Then the aftershocks haven't stopped.”

The 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck at 3.36am, when most were still asleep. In the hardest-hit towns of Amatrice, Accumoli and Arquata del Tronto, it razed homes, buckled roads and buried residents under mounds of masonry. More than 12 hours after the initial tremor, bulldozers and earthmovers rumbled slowly up winding, deeply fissured roads, while temporary camps and kitchens were being set up to house and feed the several thousand made homeless.

The Mayor of Amatrice, told reporters “The situation is dramatic, there are many dead. Rescue efforts are under way and it is very, very difficult... Much of the village has disappeared. The aim now is to save as many lives as possible.”

The Mayor of Accumoli, Stefano Petrucci, added through his tears, that the situation was “even more dreadful than we feared, with buildings collapsed, people trapped under the rubble and no sound of life”.

As with similar tragic events, this earthquake tests the faith of many people. How can there be an omnipotent God who allows people to suffer in such terrible disasters? Surely continuing to be a faithful disciple of Jesus after such a terrible tragedy is very hard?

In the news, I saw footage of a nun lying in the rubble, blood pouring from her, and I wondered what words she was praying. Believing in a God after a terrible natural disaster is not easy, but Jesus never said having faith was easy. In fact, in today's gospel, he warns us of the cost of discipleship - and that cost is very high.

Of course, the most infamous natural tragedy of this sort was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which one hundred thousand died. The earthquake and its fallout strongly influenced the intelligentsia of the European Age of Enlightenment. The renowned writer-philosopher

Voltaire used the earthquake in *Candide*, and in his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* ("Poem on the Lisbon disaster").

Voltaire's *Candide* attacked the notion that all was for the best in this tragedy. How could a benevolent deity supervise the world when the darkness of the Lisbon disaster was allowed to destroy, families, homes and take so many lives? Therefore the 1755 earthquake made Voltaire ask, "Who will find the cause of this evil?" Surely God, who is love and kindness, the Author of all things, cannot be considered the author of this catastrophe? Hence much discussion about the Nature of God and human suffering was pursued throughout the enlightenment and on into the 20th century (and there could be a whole sermon on this topic alone).

However, nowadays, most theologians would advance the position held by theologian The Revd Prof Keith Ward, who expounds the fact that with a terrible "earthquake we cannot deny the suffering and loss but we must do everything possible to mitigate suffering now and in the future. It is also necessary to accept that disaster is part of the cosmos in which we live. God did not cause the earthquake. The earthquake was caused by the natural laws of the universe, which in turn are necessary for our survival. We need always to strive for good and not be defeated by the frequent tragedies of human existence in a world of pain and loss."

Imagine then hearing Luke's gospel after losing your home and loved ones in such a natural disaster. What sense would that Anglican priest of Amatrice, at the epicentre of the earthquake, make of it?

Jesus made it clear to the multitude that followed him that the cost of faith and discipleship to Him carries with it a sharp and stark commitment - that being a disciple of Christ is not easy. In fact, it is very hard. One has to be prepared to sever the natural kinship ties of loving one's mother and father and children and on top of that one must sever all desires for wealth and possessions.

At first reading of the Gospel Luke 14:25-33 this sounds extremely harsh. The word 'hate' seems to juxtapose other gospel message of "Loving ones enemy" and the commandment to "honour your father and mother".

'Miseo' is the Greek word that translates into 'hate' in St. Luke. It has seated within its roots in Attic Greek, the fundamental sense of 'separation' or 'exclusion' of one from another - usually out of a fear of physical or spiritual harm. It doesn't, therefore, include the 'psychological sense' of anger or emotional 'againstness' that modern English generally situates in the word 'hate', but rather describes one's relational orientation towards another. According to The Revd G. Neal, "'Miseo' has a very clear meaning: it means to separate or remove one's self from entangling relationships or circumstances which might come between the disciple and the master".

And this important point is picked up by the NT academic, Leon Morris. He says, "There is no place in Jesus's teaching political hatred. Jesus had commanded his followers to love even their enemies so it is impossible to hold that he is here telling them to literally hate their earthly

nearest and dearest. But hating can mean something like loving less. Jesus is surely meaning that the love the disciple has in him must be so great that the best of earthly love is hated by comparison”.

But Jesus needs to make clear in the short time he has between this point in his ministry and his final entrance to Jerusalem, to the magnitude, of the change that his kingdom message is bringing to Earth. In fact, he mentions the **cross which one must bear**, which in 1st century Palestine would have signalled to all those listening the chance that their faith in and following of Him might end in their death.

Jesus asked the disciples to count the cost of being a follower and asked his disciples to recognise and agree to some of the terms. In following Christ we cannot simply follow our own inclination. We cannot follow him and the world's way at the same time.

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

Following him may mean we lose relationships, dreams, material things, and even our lives. We know that Christian persecution is still alive and real. Here and now in the world Christians are risking their lives for their faith. According to the charity Open Doors, “100 million Christians around the globe are currently suffering. They are real, and they are our brothers and sisters in Christ”. Each month 322 Christian are killed for their faith worldwide.

This passage speaks to the importance of loyalty and allegiance to Jesus over all other competing loyalties including family self-interest and possessions not literal hatred of all those in ones family has one has loved. Jesus emphasis is that a call to discipleship immediately creates a new situation. Staying in the old relationships and family patterns, and following Christ, mutually exclude each other. Jesus does not want his followers to rush into discipleship without thinking of what is involved. He is clear about the price anyone who comes to him must pay.

He uses two examples, one of the builder and the other of the king. The builder, preparing to build a tower, probably over a vineyard, must work out how much he needs to build a safe and secure home, unlike so many that crumbled in the Italian earthquake last week. And he also talks of a king who has no option but to react to an oncoming army by estimating his military strength before he declares war.

Also, Discipleship in Luke's gospel seems to involve an even more radical break with one's possessions than in any other gospel. The story of Zacharias in Luke 19:1-10 ends with Zacharias giving half his possessions to the poor. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of giving and sharing on the part of those who are well off.

The inference is that something new is occurring in Jesus kingdom ministry. St Paul reflects on this from his own prison cell where he is suffering as a follower of Christ. However, even under

those circumstances he calls for Philomena to take back his slave, and not to rebuke him or punish him for running away. Instead, he wants him to return to his household as a “brother in Christ”. This command would have been countercultural at the time of writing. St Paul calls for a new behaviour pattern between master and slave just as Jesus says the old way of family kinship and possessions will no longer flourish in his kingdom.

In some ways St Paul could have been seen as the poster boy for discipleship. St Paul's experience of Jesus, who he did not personally know, shows an inner faith that completely transformed his life, and exemplifies the types of discipleship Jesus described to the multitude. After his conversion, Paul experienced God in a totally new way, which changed his life, family ties and attitude to possessions forever.

But I also want to look, just quickly, at two modern days disciples, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Teresa and their response to the their call and cost of discipleship.

Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), written in Germany at the time of the rise of Nazism, takes up this theme. The book is an exposition of what it means to follow Jesus Christ in a modern world. Jesus calls people to a kind of discipleship that is not cheap, akin to Bonhoeffer's aversion towards “cheap grace”. For him Faith is not to be entered into without deep consideration of the consequences and costs.

“Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

Like St Paul, Bonhoeffer spent time in prison in the last two years of his life, corresponding with family and friends, pastoring fellow prisoners, and reflecting on the meaning of "Jesus Christ for today.”

As the months progressed, he began outlining a new theology, penning enigmatic lines that had been inspired by his reflections on the nature of Christian action in history.

"God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross," he wrote. "He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which He is with us and helps us. [The Bible] ... makes quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. ... The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help."

Another such modern day saint who was called to this type of discipleship, and changed the world through their commitment to Jesus, was Mother Teresa. On a train between Calcutta and Darjeeling, 1946, Mother Teresa said: “I heard the call to give up all and follow Christ into the slums to serve Him among the poorest of the poor. It was an order. I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them”.

In 1952, Mother Teresa opened the first home for the dying in a space made available by the city of Calcutta. With the help of Indian officials, she converted an abandoned Hindu temple into the Kalighat, the Home of the dying and Destitute, a free hospice for the poor.

Those brought to the home received medical attention and were afforded the opportunity to die with dignity, according to the rituals of their faith; Muslims were read the Quran, Hindus received water from the Ganges, and Catholics received the Last Rites. "A beautiful death", Mother Teresa said, "is for people who lived like animals to die like angels—loved and wanted."

When I worked as a volunteer in India I met Mother Teresa. I was a young, just out of university, and I was very shocked at the death of a young girl I had been looking after. What could I do? I thought I should leave family, friends and possessions and join the nuns as a lay assistant. However, Mother Teresa said to me: "Go back home and minister to those in your own community".

At first glance this might seem the opposite of what Jesus asked of his disciples. However, in reality it goes to the heart of Jesus' message. The new behaviour pattern to put "wholehearted free service to the poor." I believe that Mother Teresa was saying it's not so much where or how you show your faith - i.e. what you give up for it but it's the willingness to follow Christ that matters most. And today Mother Teresa is to be canonised by the Catholic Church. So despite criticism of her work, some of which is valid, she was without doubt a person who not only understood the cost of discipleship to Jesus but enacted on that calling throughout her life.

Christ is asking you to consider whether you are prepared to make a full surrender of your will before you attach yourself to his side. If after experiencing a terrible natural disaster like an earthquake, or having seen appalling human suffering, you still want to follow Him weigh up everything before you act, count the cost, decide deliberately and with full understanding of what it is you are doing.

We are asked today to consider diligently and reverently what it means to have a living faith in Jesus Christ, to enter his spiritual kingdom and become one of his subjects. I know here in St Mary's we do strive to do this with cheerful hearts and full commitment not only to our Saviour but also to one another - always striving for good whatever the circumstances.

Amen.

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