

[Luke 14:25-35](#)

Last week on the video and then in person at Knaphill (in front of my new Superintendent Minister) I said that a statement on the Methodist website claiming to sum up the good news was a half-truth at best. The words were,

God loves you unconditionally, no strings attached. That's the good news.

I said that wasn't the good news according to Jesus, who tended to say things such as 'Repent and believe the good news'. Yes, it's true that God takes the first step in loving us before we ever deserve it, but if it is to mean anything we need to respond. And that can be costly.

We see something similar in today's reading. Here there is a crowd travelling with Jesus but he says that if you want to become a disciple, there is a price to pay.

And that's a clue. The issue is, am I in the crowd or am I a disciple? To be in the crowd you just have to hear the attractive message that God loved us before we ever loved him and be intrigued. But if you want to be a disciple, then you have some big decisions to make in response to that love.

The story is told of a child who asked, "Mummy, do all fairy stories end with the words 'And they all lived happily ever after'?"

Mum replied, "No, some end with the words, 'When I became a Christian all my problems disappeared.'"

What do we need to weigh up if we are to be a disciple, rather than a crowd member? Three things:

Firstly, *the Cross*.

²⁶ 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Carrying the cross is paralleled with hating your own life. Because 'carrying our cross' doesn't mean enduring whatever pain comes our way through life, it means being on the way to die. In Jesus' time, someone carrying their cross was on their way to execution. Their life had effectively ended.

I think it was Winston Churchill who said there was a difference between something that was worth living for and something that was worth dying for. And a politician of a very different hue from Churchill, namely Tony Benn, took this further when he said that he preferred those who had a belief worth dying for to those who had a belief they thought was worth killing for.

And I wish I didn't have to say this, but that is what Jesus says. Being his disciple involves being willing to die for our faith.

Of course, we frequently remark on how grateful we are that we don't have to face that choice in our society, and we certainly should be grateful. For in one sense we are a minority, an abnormality. Historically and in the present day there are so many societies where faith in Jesus and in his teaching is seen as a threat that millions of our brothers and sisters live with this reality on a daily basis.

Each week I receive an email from Christian Solidarity Worldwide in which they urge Christians to pray and act for those suffering for their faith around the globe. In the last week we have been praying for Christians in Pakistan who are falsely accused of blasphemy against the Islamic prophet Muhammad, a crime that carries the death penalty. People with petty disputes against someone try to invoke this law.

And we have also been praying for those who have been forcibly 'disappeared' by government forces or terrorists around the world. These have included Malaysia, Peru, Nigeria, China, and other places. Some of these people have been missing for years.

Is our faith worth dying for?

Secondly, *counting the Cost.*

Here is a quotation from the tourist guide to St John's College, Cambridge, referring to its magnificent chapel:

The 19th century chapel was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, apart from the tower which was an afterthought made possible by a former member of St John's called Henry Hoare, who unfortunately died before he could pay for it all!

Similarly, Jesus talks about working out whether you can afford to pay for a tower before you build it, or a king calculating whether he can afford to wage war against another king. He concludes,

³³In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

There is going to be a cost if we decide to follow Jesus. Although John Wesley found that some of his converts became better off because they gave up spending money on worthless and unhealthy things, nevertheless the way of Jesus has a cost.

It will call us to be more generous with people in need.

It will sometimes have a negative effect on our popularity, because people will mock Jesus and anyone who follows him.

It may have a cost in the world of work or even a social organisation where following Jesus may involve taking an ethical stand. We might have promotion blocked. We might not be able to hold office.

It may have a cost when family members or friends think we are crazy and dissociate themselves from us.

So, Jesus says, if you're going to move from the crowd to the disciples you'd better count the cost.

Right now, many of us are counting the cost quite literally as we face a level of inflation that we haven't seen for decades and wonder what the coming winter has in store for us. We are trimming the fat from our budgets, and cutting our energy use as much as we can. These are sensible things to do.

And if we do that in the economic world, should we not also do it in the life of the Spirit? What will we need to give up in order to follow Jesus?

Thirdly and finally, *the Commitment.*

What Jesus says at the end about salt losing its saltiness (verses 34-35) is a matter of commitment, not chemistry. As one scholar puts it:

The final saying about saltiness makes less sense to us than to Jesus and his audience, since we cannot quite imagine salt becoming unsalty. But salt from the Dead Sea was in fact a mixture of all sorts of things, salt itself only being one ingredient. If the salt crystals themselves were dissolved away, then the remaining residue would be useless, fit for nothing.¹

So what is Jesus saying to us when he warns us not to let the salt lose its saltiness? He's saying, don't let your faith in Jesus get dissolved in the wider culture. It's a call to retain a commitment to our distinctiveness as Christians.

As faith in Jesus began to spread across the Roman Empire, there were certainly situations where the temptation before the disciples was to dissolve their commitment in order to have an easier or a quieter life. One example was that under Roman law, Judaism had some special privileges which were not extended to the followers of Jesus. If they wanted an easier life, they could roll back all their emphasis on Jesus and just say they were good Jews. That's what the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament is all about, and it's why the writer reminds them of the supremacy of Jesus.

Or another temptation was when good Roman citizens, whatever their religion, were enjoined to burn a pinch of incense to the emperor and say the words, 'Caesar is Lord.' Surely just saying that once every now and again would be harmless? But it was a denial of who Jesus was, so to do it would be to dissolve their Christian faith. They had to resist, whatever the cost.

Today we face our own temptations to dissolve our commitment to Jesus so that we fit in with society. It can come in various forms, urging us to change our attitudes to money and possessions, to career and ambitions, to sex and relationships.

And sometimes people in the church tell us that the best way to reach people today for Christ is to adapt our faith to today's standards. But given what Jesus says here about the risk of salt losing its saltiness, we have to say that such a strategy is spiritual suicide. Jesus calls us to a distinctive commitment.

Conclusion

You know, I wrote this sermon with a heavy heart. Not another one where I'm talking all about the cost and the sacrifice of following Jesus? Surely there is some good news somewhere rather than having to proclaim something that can sound so austere?

But the reality is our own culture is moving further and further away from Christianity as its basis. We do need to be aware of dangers that may soon stalk us.

But beyond all that is that this call to costly commitment is only in the light of the costly commitment Jesus gave to us. It does us no harm to remember the

Gospel message that Jesus gave up the glory of heaven for an obscure life and death on the Cross.

May the Holy Spirit grant us courage when the only response of gratitude we can show is one that involves us paying a high price.

¹ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/the-costly-grace-of-following-jesus-in-luke-14/>