

Good News from Doctor Luke 14

The cost of following Jesus

Luke 9:57-62, 14:25-35.

As I have prepared for my Sabbatical it has become clear to me that the reason why we don't go all the way in following Jesus and being His disciple is the cost.....

Luke has already realised this - its costly to put family and relationships second and put on hold a career as a doctor but for some that what it takes....

Imagine a politician standing on a soapbox addressing a crowd. 'If you're going to vote for me', he says 'you're voting to lose your homes and families; you're asking for higher taxes and lower wages; you're deciding in favour of loosing all you love best! So come on -who's on my side?' The crowd wouldn't even bother heckling, or throwing rotten tomatoes at him. They would just be puzzled. Why on earth would anyone try to advertise himself in this way?

But isn't that what Jesus is doing in this astonishing passage in Luke 14? "Want to be my disciple, do you? Well, in that case you have to learn to hate your family, give up your possessions, and get ready for a nasty death!" Hardly the way, as we say, to win friends and influence people.

But wait a minute. Supposing, instead of a politician, we think of the leader of a great expedition, forging a way through the high and dangerous mountain pass to bring urgent medical aid to villagers cut off from the rest of the world. "If you want to come any further," the leader says, "you'll have to leave your packs behind. From here on the path is too steep to carry all that stuff. You probably won't find it again. And you'd better send your last postcards home; this is a dangerous route and it's very likely that several of us won't make it back." We can understand that. We may not like the sound of it, but we can see why it would make sense.

And we can see, therefore, that Jesus is more like the second person than the first. Since Christianity has often, quite rightly been associated with what are called 'family values', it comes as a shock to be told to 'hate' your parents, wife and

children, and siblings; but when the instruction goes one step further, that one must hate one's own self, and be prepared for shameful death ('take up your cross' wasn't simply a figure of speech in Jesus' world), then we begin to see what's going on. Jesus is not denying the importance of close family, and the propriety of living in supportive harmony with them. But when there is an urgent task to be done, as there now is, then everything else, including one's own life, must be put at risk for the sake of the Kingdom.

So says Luke: resist the temptation to put your hands over your ears, as Jesus says some of the harshest things you've heard from him yet.

So did nobody ever follow Him or have millions over the centuries responded to the call? Hating your family, giving up your possessions, carrying your own instrument of torture - what on earth is he on about? Most Christians in today's world, and I suspect a good many of Jesus' own hearers, are tempted to try to avoid or ignore this kind of stuff and even pretend these verses aren't even in their bibles.

But that I would suggest would be a mistake, albeit a natural and understandable one. Let's think about what Jesus was up against. He was announcing God's new way of running things. He was telling God's people that everything up to now had been preparation, but now he was starting the real thing. And the hardest task for someone doing that is to persuade people to give up the preparatory stages they've become comfortable with. What were those preparatory stages? For Jesus' people, ancient Israel, there were two stages in particular: family and land. Israel was identified as Abraham's family, a single ethnic unit (True, some people came in from outside, like Ruth in the Old Testament; but they were still basically a people defined by family identity). And they were also identified as the people who lived in a special land: that beautiful but highly contested small country in the Middle East. Again, by the time of Jesus more Jews lived away from the land than in it, but they all knew that was their real home. That was their ancestral

possession and woe betide anyone who compromised with it (so then, as now).

The same is true of material possessions. Many of Jesus' followers then and now, have owned houses and lands, and have not felt compelled to abandon them. But being prepared to do so is the sign that one has understood the seriousness of the call to follow Jesus. Any of us, at any time, might be summoned to give up everything quite literally and respond to a new emergency situation. If we're not ready for that, we are like the tower-builder or warmonger who haven't thought through what they are really about.

These two pictures, the tower and the battle, themselves carried a cryptic warning in Jesus' day. The most important building project of the time was of course the Temple in Jerusalem: Herod the Great had begun a massive programme of rebuilding and beautifying it, and his sons and heirs were carrying on the work. But what was it all for? Would it ever be completed? Jesus had already warned that God had abandoned his house (13:35); Herod's Temple would shortly be left a smouldering ruin, its folly plain for all to see.

This is not unconnected to the second warning. If Jesus' contemporaries had fighting in mind, the chief enemy against whom they were longing to go to war was Rome. They probably only had a vague idea of who exactly the Romans were and what sort of forces they had at their command; otherwise long before they came to blows, they would have taken the wise course and found a way to peace. But Jesus' warnings, and his urgings towards peace, were falling on deaf ears. His listeners, too concerned to hang on to their ancestral possessions, were eager for a war that would set them and their land free at last. Jesus was confronting them with a true emergency, and they were unable to see it and respond appropriately. The last warning, therefore, comes with renewed force. Israel is supposed to be the salt of the earth, the people through whom God's world is kept wholesome and made tasty, but if Israel loses her particular ability and flavour, what is left? The warning backs up the cryptic sayings about the tower and the

battle, and brings us back to the all-or-nothing challenge. Jesus is facing his contemporaries with a moment of crisis in which they must either be Israel indeed, through following him, or they must face the ruin of the tower and the devastation of the lost battle.

Family and possessions: the two things Jesus now says you have to give up. God's people are being redefined, and these identity markers won't matter any more. Cling on to them, and you'll be like people keeping the curtains closed when the sun has risen. That was nighttime; this is daytime.

Jesus' challenge, then, comes to all of us at the point where we are tempted to settle down and be comfortable with the way things are. Comfort-zone Christianity. 'No' he says, 'that would be like someone wanting to build a tower, or fight a battle, without thinking out what's involved.'

It is not difficult, and Luke may already have had this in mind, to re-apply these hard sayings to the ongoing life of the church. At every stage of its life the church has faced the challenge, not only of living up to Jesus' demands, but also of placing them before the world. Where are the towers, and where are the wars, that our world is hell-bent on building and fighting? How can we summon the human race once more to costly obedience?

Many people today see Jesus and think it would be a fine thing to follow Him. The people in Luke 9 who speak to Jesus on the road are like the seed sown on rocky ground, or among thorns in the previous chapter. They want to follow, but have conditions attached. Are they ready to drop what they're doing and come right away? The obligation to bury one's father was regarded by many Jews of the time as the most holy and binding duty of a son; but Jesus says that that, too, is secondary to the call to follow Him and announce God's kingdom. The challenge to move forward, to journey on with Jesus, comes over loud and clear in the last line of the reading. Many today don't work the land and perhaps don't appreciate what happens if you are trying to plough a straight furrow and then look back to see how you did. Even if what you see is a

straight line, the act of looking back will mean that the next bit will become crooked. Think of other pictures. If you're singing a song, its no good wondering whether you sang the previous line all right. You've got to concentrate on the next line. If you're on a journey like I will be next week, the map you need is the one that tells you where to go next, not the one for the road you've just travelled. The question comes home to us with renewed force. Where is Jesus asking us to travel, not yesterday but tomorrow? Are we ready to follow Him wherever He goes?

This is no extravagant sales talk from an Evangelist: Salvation is not free for it takes over our whole life and costs the very last thing we possess, Grace is not cheap and the hollow discipleship often on offer in the 21st century is not found on the pages of the New Testament.

You need to think through, to pray through, what it's going to mean to be a follower, a learner, a disciple. You don't want to be left high and dry when God's Kingdom goes forward and you turn out to have settled for something less. You need to be prepared to ensure that no human affection takes the top spot in your heart that must be occupied by Jesus, that if you were sliced open spiritually the Cross would be the centre of your being, and that all you have and are be transferred, with a sign that says: under new management (the management of Christ). Ignatius Loyola (Founder of Jesuit Order) puts it this way:

"Lord teach me to be generous,
Teach me to serve you as you deserve:
To give and not to count the cost,
To fight and not the heed the wounds,
To toil and not to seek for rest.
To labour and to ask for no reward,
Save that of knowing that I do your will".

Now there's a prayer to pray and mean it.

"He who has ears to hear let him hear"

Pastor David

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