

# The Cost of Discipleship

a sermon preached on the

## 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lectons: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-35

The demand of the gospel is unmistakable in today's text. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."<sup>1</sup> It hardly requires spelling out. The metaphors Jesus employs sometimes shock us, especially those of us liberal-minded pacifists confronted by Jesus' war imagery. It is likely that Jesus the itinerant preacher and healer was even more outrageous and shocking to his first audiences than the gospels have allowed us to hear. Not all the sayings of Jesus passed the tests of the early councils of the church as being 'canonical' – that is, that collection which we now call the Bible. Some writings which have been intentionally excluded from the canon of Scripture while obviously falling outside what is deemed to be essential and normative, nevertheless reveal something of the memory of the generation of followers who produced them. The Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas is one such writing. A story, known as the 'parable of the assassin' is recorded in it: "Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of the Father is like a certain man who wanted to kill a powerful man. In his own house he drew his sword and stuck it into the wall in order to find out whether his hand could carry through. Then he slew the powerful man.'"<sup>2</sup> We can see why this sword-thrusting assassin was sanitized out of the canon!

The cost of discipleship should not be underestimated. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it."<sup>3</sup> This is not Jesus meek and mild, Jesus the 'I'm OK, you're OK, we're all OK' Dr Feelgood personal trainer! This is Jesus the greater Moses: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."<sup>4</sup>

There have been many ways of reflecting upon the cost of discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a remarkable book with that very title,<sup>5</sup> and not so long afterwards was to pay with his life at the hand of the Nazis for his faith. Some Christian groups have defined themselves such that inter-personal relationships and tribal relationships bear the full freight of 'proving' discipleship - following Jesus means literally separating oneself from family or friends, those who do not maintain some prescribed level of religious purity. Some Christians have reduced the costs of discipleship to holding to unswerving belief in certain rationalistic, dogmatic propositions – and being willing to defend them no matter how idiotic or coercive or abusive that may be. For some Christians the cost of discipleship has become identified with voluntary poverty and with choosing to live with the marginalised and outcast. There are some for whom the cost of discipleship is being willing to proclaim Jesus as Lord in countries where to do so courts persecution or death. I suspect that, in our time, for some a very real cost of discipleship is the choice to remain committed members of a homophobic church, even while bigots condemn them by reducing persons to 'lifestyle'.

By contrast to all these postures, commentators and observers have observed that it's hard to see any true cost of discipleship for wealthy Westerners, comfortably housed and fed, with every conceivable gadget and convenience - the mere singing of right songs, praying right prayers, believing right things, mixing with right people hardly constitutes the cost to which Jesus refers! And as a matter of empirical fact, simple Bible believers never believe the Bible simply, nor literally, choosing instead to expurgate certain unpalatable texts. The most damning text of all, the one that 'simple Bible believers' excise from their black floppy Bibles, is the one we have heard this morning: "None of you can become my

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:27

<sup>2</sup> Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas 98

<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:33

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer D, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM, 1959.

disciple if you do not give up your possessions.”<sup>6</sup> Does any of us in the wealthy West interpret this text literally?

So how do I know what the cost of discipleship might be? Will I find the answer in the creeds or the catechism or the Synod? Will I find the answer in the Bible? No, I will not. What I will find in the catechism, creeds and the Bible is the stories of those who have wrestled with the same question, and whose wrestling indicates the terms of the business of wrestling with faith. But I will not find a prescription to be followed blindly. The answer can only be found in the detail and the integrity of my experience. The builder must attend to the actual facts of the building business and his personal circumstances. The king must attend to the actual facts of his armies and that of his enemies. The assassin must ensure that his instrument of assassination will be effective. Jacob must be sure that if he wants to cross the Jabok river he is willing to suffer at the hands of the angel. Jesus must be sure that if he's going to encourage others to 'go up to Jerusalem' that he is willing to take up the cross himself.

The cost of discipleship *for me* will be determined by the unique detail of *my* life. For every single one of us there is *something* which is demanded of us. For each of us - if we have the courage to be conscious of Christ's call – there is a call to do the *one thing* we would not choose to do. That is the choice to be dis-possessed - dis-possessed of those things, those self-images, those relationships, those ideas which I have chosen for myself. The life of Jesus, the life of the Kingdom, is that life which is given to us. We cannot grasp at it, we can only desire it. And desiring this life, relinquish everything that would stand in the way of the one thing which is demanded of us. That, friends, is the **εὐαγγέλιον** *euangellion*, the Good News!

Chapter fourteen concludes with two verses which the lectionary-makers have curiously omitted: “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”<sup>7</sup> We needn't be concerned, as commentators are, as to whether these two verses were spoken by Jesus at the same time, or whether this a piece of Lucan tradition stitched on afterwards. As would-be disciples what matters is that here Jesus issues a stern warning to us. If, having recognised what the one thing is that is necessary for me, I do not attend to it, then I am as useless as salt that has lost its saltiness. Here again, is Jesus the greater Moses: “If your heart turns away and you do not hear, and you are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish.”<sup>8</sup> The cost of discipleship should not be underestimated.

But neither should we be fearful or anxious about the enormity of the cost of the necessary dis-possession – because the promise of the gospel is the pearl of great price, the abundant and liberating life of God in Christ, the possession which neither moth nor rust can destroy, the temple not made with hands, the astonishing and extravagant banquet of the kingdom, of which this and every eucharist is both realisation and promise. Blessing, life, is the gift offered to us, if we are willing to be dis-possessed of our small ego-centred selves. Thanks be to God!

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:33

<sup>7</sup> Luke 14:34-35

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 30:17-18