

The passage we heard and examined last week described a semi-private event, where Jesus was invited to a dinner by a Pharisee.

Today's Scripture, which follows immediately on the other passage, begins with the words. "Now large crowds were travelling with him", That tells us two things.

First, this is part of the Travel Narrative, the section in Luke in which the focus is on the fact that Jesus is going to Jerusalem, for "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem". (13.33)

Second, the focus has shifted from the semi-private instructions of the previous passages to a totally public situation, for here Jesus speaks to the crowd.

So we have to ask, "If this was a journey to Jerusalem, what kind of journey was it?"

Was this a funeral procession?

It was for Jesus.

It is very clear, from the statements Jesus made from time to time, that he was very well aware that this trip to Jerusalem was going to lead to his arrest, trial and death.

That was not a secret.

Jesus knew it and he was trying to get his disciples to understand it, but without much success. Trapped within their traditional Jewish understanding of the Messiah as a conquering, inspiring political leader, they couldn't wrap their minds around the idea that Jesus was going to win his victory through suffering and death. And if the disciples couldn't get it, the crowds certainly didn't.

Well, then, was it a march?

Was it leading to a battle?

Were the crowds going with Jesus in the expectation that others would join their number and they would march into Jerusalem as an irresistible force that would sweep the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers ahead of them? Were they going to Jerusalem to take over the city, to establish the beginning of a new, independent Jewish kingdom that would expand to conquer the world?

That may very well have been the expectation of some, the strong Jewish nationalists who were always itching to be free from the domination of Rome and who expected the Messiah to have that same goal.

For some, it could very well have been a march.

But for most of the people I think it was a parade.

You know what a parade does!

When the music and the marching starts, people are attracted to it.  
They flock to be part of it.  
A parade stirs up enthusiasm.  
Well, for many of the people in the crowd following Jesus it was like a parade.  
Jesus was doing great and exciting things.  
They wanted to see and hear what was happening.  
They were going to Jerusalem anyhow,  
to be there for the great festival days of Passover and Pentecost,  
so why not make the trip with a group that had a high level of enthusiasm?  
I think that Jesus' words in this passage are aimed specifically at those people in the crowd  
who were following him with enthusiasm ,  
but without any sense that following Jesus might make some demands on them.

These words of Jesus are very strong.

Listen to them again:

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother,  
wife and children,  
brothers and sisters,  
yes, and even life itself,  
cannot be my disciple."

They are not, however, as strong as they seem to us at first reading.

To us, hate is a word with strong emotional content.

To say, "I hate you" is a drastic statement.

But in the Semitic world, hate carried with it only a sense of detachment and distance.

If Jesus meant these words in the sense that we would naturally understand them,

he would be contradicting the Ten Commandments and many other passages in the Hebrew Bible.

But still, it is a strong statement.

Jesus is clearly saying that loyalty to him must override all our other loyalties,  
even our loyalties to family and to life itself.

We have to be ready to carry our cross.

If you remember the story of Jesus' death, you know what that means.

A condemned criminal had to carry the cross-bar to the place of execution,  
where he was nailed to it and raised up to die.

Jesus has to be more important to his followers than even life itself!

Those words were designed to deflate thoughtless enthusiasm.

And there have been times and places where they were clearly necessary!

In the small town in which I grew up,

being a church member was almost a requirement for social acceptance.

A businessman who didn't belong to some church had two strikes against him.

And after World War 2, at least in the United States,

there was a tremendous surge toward church membership.

New churches were established and flourished everywhere.

It was not unusual for a church to go from a handful of people to an attendance of 500 or more.

In those situations, these words of Jesus were clearly applicable.  
As people flocked to the churches, they needed to hear the question,  
"Have you counted the cost of following Jesus?"

But this is Calgary, in the year 2016.  
This is a time when churches are shrinking,  
    when attending worship is not the common way to spend a Sunday morning.  
And we are here, in St. Andrew's, a faithful remnant of God's people.  
How does that question apply to us?

The two little parables Jesus told can help us answer that question.  
He spoke about a man who planned to build a tower in his vineyard  
    as a lookout to protect the vineyard from predators.  
Anyone who does that without counting the cost may find himself unable to finish  
    and end up being ridiculed by his neighbours.  
When I was young, there was a house along a main road which sat unfinished for many years.  
The builder was able to complete the structure but couldn't afford to finish the inside.  
People seldom passed the house without making negative remarks about the builder!  
The same lesson is found in the story of a king who is planning a battle  
and has to compare his army with the opposing army.  
If he doesn't have enough soldiers, he's better off seeking a peace treaty.  
The message is clear: to follow Jesus we have to count the cost.  
If we aren't willing to pay the price, to give Jesus priority in our lives, we will never be his  
disciples.

That speaks to us precisely because we are here to worship  
    when our friends and neighbours are occupied in different ways.  
By our presence here this morning we are claiming to be Christians  
    or at least considering becoming Christians.  
What does it mean to follow Jesus, to claim his name?

To follow Jesus means to commit yourself completely to him.  
Jesus is not satisfied to be a peripheral part of our lives;  
    he insists on being at the centre.  
In the play of our lives, he has to have the starring role.  
On the list of our priorities, he demands to be first.  
Our primary loyalty has to be to him.  
He is the centre around which our worlds have to turn.  
Let's not underestimate or play down the cost of being a disciple of Jesus!  
One of our hymns puts it well:  
"Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?"  
That's the question Jesus asks us, each one of us.  
What does it mean to say "Yes" to that question,  
to sing the last stanza of that hymn, and mean it:

"Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.  
In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll live and move and grow in you and you in me.?"

In one sense, it's impossible to say what it means.

It takes a whole lifetime to work it out in practice,  
and no two lifetimes are the same.

But basically it means that we open our hearts to accept the love that God offers us in Jesus  
and seek to reflect God's love in our lives!

That's very much like opening your heart to another person.

When you let someone else into your life, things change, don't they?

Everyone who's ever said, "I do" knows that.

Everyone who's ever had a baby knows that.

But nobody can tell you in advance just what those changes will be!

So when we open our hearts to the love of God,  
we may expect our lives to change for the better,  
but we'll only find out what those changes are as time goes by.

We will find ourselves being shaped by the example of Jesus,  
learning to reflect the love of God as he did.

We will find the God and Father of Jesus Christ becoming more and more important to us,  
as he was all-important to Jesus.

I can't think of any better change that can take place in a life,  
but, folks, you'd better be prepared for that change if you want to follow Jesus.

There is a cost to following Jesus.

Jim Elliott, a university classmate of mine, paid that cost.

He followed God's call to bring the good news of God's love  
to the savage Auca tribe in South America,

and he and his companions died in a shower of Auca spears.

But Jim had written in his journal words which put those deaths in the proper perspective.

He wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Think about that.

"He (or she) is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

To give our lives, which we know we cannot keep, to Jesus  
is to gain a rich experience of God's love which will never end.

There is a cost to following Jesus; of that there is no doubt.

But the benefits of following Jesus make the cost absolutely worthwhile!

To God, who calls us to himself in Jesus Christ, be all the praise and glory, now and forever.  
Amen.