

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Today’s gospel reading has the heading, in the NRSV of the Bible, ‘The Cost of Discipleship.’ Those words immediately made me think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book of the same title. Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor, “had a unique view of discipleship that emphasized the communal aspect of following Jesus. He believed that discipleship is not just about personal spiritual growth, but also about the formation of a community of believers who live out their faith together.”¹ He had firsthand experience of the true cost of being a follower of Christ. He lived his faith in Nazi Germany, where he saw that German Christianity failed to resist the Nazi regime, and he paid the price for his faithfulness.² During WW2 he was given the opportunity of teaching at Union Seminary in New York city but declined. He travelled back to Germany to be in solidarity with his fellow Christian dissenters and to his eventual death. God was first in his life.

God demands first place in our lives, and that kind of discipleship is costly.

Our reading today, however, sounds rather extreme. Jesus talks to the crowds that had followed him after the banquet at the Pharisee’s house. He says, “²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” If that is really the case, it’s surprising that anyone would want to become a disciple of Jesus. Did he really mean ‘hate’? Again, we have to look at the translation from the Greek. The word translated as ‘hate’ (Greek: *meseo*) also means to disregard, be indifferent to. And we also need to put this verse into its original context in 1st-century Palestine. Jesus was speaking in Aramaic, and his use of the word ‘hate’ is hyperbole, or exaggeration for effect, which was a common idea. He was not actually calling us to hate our relatives and hate our life. In Jewish culture, the Rabbis would use the word ‘hate’ to indicate a lesser love. So, Jesus is saying that we need to love God more than we love our relatives and our own lives. Jesus is calling us to a commitment above all other commitments, including commitment to family. ‘Commitment’ is an unpopular word these days. How often have we heard people say, ‘I can’t commit to being here every week.’ And “hate” in its original context is not a call to develop an intense dislike for family members but is rather a call to love them less than Christ. This is a common Old Testament idea.

The second requirement to be a disciple of Jesus is that they must be willing to “carry the cross” (14:27). And thirdly, a willingness to give up possessions is necessary (14:33). Jesus seeks devoted disciples, undistracted by the cares of everyday life. In Luke 9, he said to a man who wanted to be a disciple, but first needed to bury his father, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead” (9:60). And to one who wanted to say goodbye to his family, Jesus said, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God” (9:62).

In the second part of the reading, Jesus gives two analogies about counting the cost of being a disciple. The examples would be familiar in first century Jewish life. Jesus compares becoming a disciple first to building a tower or secondly to going into battle. Who wastes time, effort and resources on a building project, before knowing whether funds will be available to complete the project? In first century life, most of the people in Jesus’ crowds would understand the need to not waste one’s earnings, even if they were not involved personally in construction projections.

Or which king would not first try and make a peace agreement with his opponent if he thinks his military force is outmanned? A Jewish Greco-Roman audience would be quite familiar with both examples, of building and

¹ <https://www.newstartdiscipleship.com/post/dietrich-bonhoeffer-cost-of-discipleship-summary-and-quotes>

² Bonhoeffer died in 1945 aged 39 in a Nazi concentration camp.

battles, which were part of their common experience. Jesus is warning his potential followers to carefully consider the cost before taking up the mission of following him. And, in Jesus’ day, it really did cost something. Families were divided over following the Jewish prophet from Galilee (Luke 12:51-53). In the end, Jesus wants the audience to understand what’s at stake if they plan on continuing with him on his journey.

So in this somewhat dismal and harsh reading, where’s the Good News?

It’s in the very invitation that Jesus gives; to follow him. Jesus doesn’t send us away from him with these challenging teachings. He’s just warning us because the cost of following. But he invites us to follow him. And that means two very important things: That Jesus will lead the way; and that he will always be with us.

And Jesus is really only asking us to do what he has already done. He put serving God and saving us before caring for his earthly family. He gave up his possessions for us and even emptied himself of his divinity for us. He took up his cross. And, of course, he gave up his life for us. Jesus did all that to be our Saviour, to save us from our selfish lives and instead dedicate our lives to serving God.

Jesus’ last promise to us, before he returned to Heaven, was that he would always be with us, to the end of the age. And when we follow him, he is. He is helping us to carry our own crosses, and to live our lives for him. Forgiving us when we fall short. And inviting us, over and over again, to follow him. And isn’t that someone we all want to put first in our lives? So let us follow him faithfully until he calls us home.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN