

SERMON OXLEY 8TH SEPTEMBER 2013

PENTECOST 16

Luke 14: 25-33

Today's gospel reading is about the cost of discipleship. It's a theme that runs right through the New Testament. Jesus taught it. He told parables about it. The apostles wrote about it in their letters. Obviously God thinks its a very vital subject. His chief spokesmen Jesus and the apostles make that very clear. They not only taught it and wrote about it. Most of them gave their lives to illustrate it.

There is a danger in having the subject come up so often for preaching. It can come over as yet another challenge for us to pull our socks up, to do better, to make more sacrifices. It can seem like the message is wanting life to become a lot grimmer. We might end up thinking that the Christian life has taken all the joy out of living.

If that is how we feel, then we might be impervious about what God has to say to us this morning. I would appeal to us to keep one thing in mind as we consider this passage from Luke. It must be seen in the light of the gospel. Everything the whole bible teaches has to be seen in the light of the gospel. We have not properly understood any passage whether it's in the Old Testament or the New Testament until we have looked at it in the light of the gospel. The gospel is all about Jesus. Jesus is our great interpreter. He is the light of the world. He has to shine his light on any passage before God can address us through it.

The reality is that if we try to read what the bible says through the narrow prism of our human reason, then there is so much that doesn't make sense. Take what the gospel for today is saying to us. 'Whoever comes to me,' says Jesus, 'and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.'

Now, what sort of teaching is that? Here is Jesus telling us to hate to be his disciples. And whom are we to hate? Not our enemies but members of our own family. How preposterous! How offensive to our ears!

Clearly, this is not meant to be taken literally. The one who told the parable of the Good Samaritan could not have meant it to be taken literally. The one who said that if we were to be his disciples we were to love one another could not have meant it to be taken literally. The one who taught us to love even our enemies could not possibly want us to hate our families in order to follow him.

No. If we look at the whole body of Jesus' teaching and that of the apostles, there could be no instance when it is right to hate. God never hates. He hates the sin but he never ceases to love the sinner. He loves the sinner even when he is punishing him. Parents don't stop loving their children when they punish them. If God never hates we are never to hate.

How then are we to understand what appears to be a very incongruous

statement? We have here a Hebrew figure of speech - hyperbole or exaggeration. Jesus often used it. He would exaggerate to drive home his point very forcibly. What he really meant is seen more clearly in Matthew's version of the same teaching. We find this in Matt 10: 37: 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me'. No mention of hatred there - just a matter of priority. Who comes first when we have to make a priority decision? Jesus or our family? Why, Jesus of course.

You see. We are not comparing our love of our families with our love of an ordinary human being. That would be like comparing apples and oranges. We are comparing our love of our families with our love of the Son of God. We need to keep reminding ourselves of who he is. He is the one who died for us. He is the one who made peace with God on our behalf. He is the one who took upon himself at the Cross the full brunt of the wrath of God for our sin. He is the one who offered up to God on our behalf the perfect obedience and perfect love that we should offer but cannot do so.

But that all happened a long time ago. Why should that control our decision making now? This where the rest of the gospel comes in. The resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost tell the rest of the story. Jesus rose from the dead - for those who have the heart to believe, inescapable evidence that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, that on the Cross he had reconciled humanity to God. He ascended to be with the Father in the heavenly realm, directing with the Father the building of the Kingdom of God through the agency of Word, Spirit and Church.

This is the gospel. This is why we meet every Sunday. We meet to recount this story. It is the only story that makes sense of this tempestuous life of ours. It is the only story that gives us hope of a better world. It is the only story that offers a heavenly role to a human race that has in its ranks terrorists, drug dealers and people smugglers.

But the story is not yet over. We are still in the midst of the battle. We feel inadequate for the task. The forces of darkness seem to be winning on all sides. We feel impotent to stop the wars. We feel sickened by the images of children being blown apart by bombs. We gasp in disbelief when we see pictures of people writhing in agony as they struggle to breathe after a gas attack. How can we be content to know that Jesus has made his peace with God on our behalf, when these horrendous things are happening two thousand years later.

No. The victory has been won. Christ has conquered. But the battle continues. Evil runs rampant throughout this world. And we are not to stay on the sidelines and leave others to go to the frontline. We cannot leave it to people like the Pakistani girl who was shot because she wanted girls in her country to be educated. We cannot leave it to our politicians to bring our country to greatness when there is moral corruption at the heart of our nation.

Friends, we are not talking about a political battle. We are not talking about a battle of strategies. We are not talking about a contest of arms. We are talking about a spiritual battle. We are talking about the same

battle that saw the only perfect human being who ever lived executed as a common criminal, that saw most of his apostles also executed, that saw countless thousands of believers thrown to the lions, that saw Ridley and Latimer burnt at the stake in England less than 500 years ago, that saw Bonhoeffer and thousand of others martyred in the Nazi era, that saw countless believers martyred in the the Soviet Union under the Communist tyrant Stalin.

But the battle is not yet over. In Australia, we see the divinely ordained foundation of society - husband, wife and children - under severe attack. We see continuing pressure for liberal abortion laws to be even further liberalised. We see continuing advocacy for euthanasia. We see TV stations exposing people to more and more degrading material.

We are nowhere near understanding the passage set down for today if we get hung up on what Jesus is saying about us and our family. He is trying to shock us into seeing how all-important is this battle we are engaged in. If we are his disciples we cannot avoid the battle. We have to get involved in it. But its not a minor scuffle. Its a cosmic battle. The forces of evil are throwing everything they've got into it. Jesus and his people are under severe attack. As it has always been, the forces of evil have an implacable hatred for anyone who challenges their power. History has ample evidence of that.

So, let's face reality . This is too big a battle to go in unarmed. As Jesus said in the passage for today, any king going into battle has to look at how well he is armed so that he is sure he can conquer his enemy. One

thing is certain, if we go into the fight depending just on our own strength, we have no chance. Our cleverness is not enough. Our strategy is not enough. Our organisation is not enough. We need Jesus. We need the spiritual power he won for us in the Cross and resurrection. We need the truth that he has given us through his word. We need to believe that the victory he won is ours if we follow his directions.

We have one tremendous advantage over the powers of evil. We already know the outcome of the battle. The New Testament tells us how its all going to end. Christ will return to wipe out the evil that has so seriously corrupted the world that he and the Father had lovingly created. The vision of John in Revelation tells us how its all going to end. There will be a new Creation. Everything will be transformed. The tyrants, the terrorists, the drug dealers, the people who corrupt others for the sake of profit, will be judged.

So, we can go into the battle with confidence. But we have to decide whom we shall serve. If it is to be Christ, we must give him our complete loyalty. He must come first. He deserves to come first. He alone can assure us of ultimate victory. He gave his all for us. We have to be prepared to give our all for him. We have to be prepared to make any sacrifice that he calls us to make. Hopefully, we won't have to give our life. But if called upon to do so, we have to be prepared to do even that. What else can we do for one who shed his precious blood for us.