

Year C/Proper 23 - 4 September 2016

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once again today we are confronted with one of the more difficult sayings of Jesus. His words shatter our more comfortable stained glass images of him. *“Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters...cannot be my disciple”*. Frankly, this is a confusing even frightening sentence coming especially from the man who tells us to “love our enemies”.

Down through the centuries and frequently today, certain groups have used this kind of language to bully and gain their own power. It has resulted in the severing of relationships and communities. And in times and places where religious differences are drawn sharply, more sharply than in Canada, people *have* forsaken their families and families have forsaken their children for religious issues. Most religious traditions including our own have radicals who have shunned their loved ones because they have taken a different religious path even though it might simply be a different denomination. This radical language can lead to radical behaviour when it is taken literally. But what is really saying? We need to look at the whole context. Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem; that is a

journey towards the cross, not a popular destination because it is the place of abandonment and death. With his popularity increasing, perhaps they are getting him wrong, not understanding the impact of his message? They put their political hopes on him, looking for a mighty king, even a wonder worker to take on Caesar and restore the Holy Land to Israel. They are not expecting him to be condemned a criminal and put to death shamefully -- and they sure don't expect to be following *that* example. So, to make them wake up he gives them shocking references to familial hatred, cross bearing, even hating oneself. He is illustrating the cost of discipleship.

Let's look at the Old Testament background of the word hate (*miseo* in the Greek). In many passages the word is used to indicate not a loathing or hatred but a lesser sort of love, a secondary attachment. It is possible that he is using it in this way. In fact in Matthew's version it reads, “whoever loves his family *more* than me cannot be my disciple”, a rather different tone.

On the other hand with the need to drive his point home about discipleship, this intense language may be necessary, a type of Hyperbole. What this passage is driving home, for them and for us is that discipleship is costly, it is about giving our selves away, working hard to reduce our pride and replace it with humility, the putting aside of self in

favour of seeing all of life through the lens of service to God.

It seems to me that our Lord here is pleading that to follow him is to offer our lives with a single-mindedness and deep commitment. To have a religion that is a mildly diverting weekend hobby (a kind of Christian entertainment) is not following Christ. Having a desire for community or for an intellectual interest in theology without these things impacting the way we live is not costly discipleship. For he also says whoever does not carry his own cross, estimate the cost of the tower in advance, consider whether he should go to war and if he does can defeat the marching army – is not ready to be a follower. You have to think these things through before going down the path of what might be religious deception.

Few of us can respond to our Lord's call in the way some great souls have done. To renounce all in a literal way is a fearful thing and is perhaps possible only for some very committed and extraordinary people – which is why we know these people as great and holy souls.

In the Letter to Philemon – one of the shortest books in the whole Bible – all of which you have heard this morning – Paul has been dealing with Onesimus, a runaway slave he encountered in Rome. Those days runaway slaves were flogged and or killed, whichever came first. Life was very fragile. Onesimus, Philemon's slave, ran away. Paul found

him in Rome. Somehow Onesimus came under Paul's influence. He accepted Christ and his whole pattern of life was changed. On the other hand Philemon was a wealthy man who we are told had a church meeting in his house. That tells us something about him - he was courageous and relatively well off as he must have had a house large enough to accommodate the people.

Paul had much to do with Philemon in his earlier travels. Now he writes to him, and sends the letter with Onesimus, asking Philemon to take the slave back, to treat him as a brother in Christ and not kill him. But for Onesimus the real test is the risk for him to go back to the potential servitude he fled - a courageous step. In this Epistle Paul speaks about obedience, not to him, but to the laws of the new kingdom that Philemon and Onesimus now share as Christians, a kingdom that speaks of the last (slaves) being first, that is (brothers) -- a kingdom that speaks of forgiveness seventy times seven.

We sometimes think that if we have not had the warm fuzzy's we have not had a religious experience. But it's so much more. This is about transformation. Our relationship with Jesus begins as does other relationships. There is something in him that attracts us. We are drawn by those feelings of attraction. We may move into a deep commitment to him and what he seeks to teach us. All of this can be deeply moving and can probe the whole range

of our feelings. But there comes a time as in any relationship, when feelings change, they settle down, sometimes they fade away. We wrestle with time, familiarity, predictability. And so our spiritual lives are a life-long work in progress.

We are called, one by one, and together, to the gritty, hard business of being faithful servants who have counted the cost and know that building towers is not easy, finishing them when you are tired is even more difficult, and battling the forces of evil that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God is costly and not terribly popular.

Listen again to the old collect: “Stir up O Lord the wills of thy faithful people”. It is all too easy to stir up emotions – religious or otherwise. It is very much more difficult to stir up our wills. But it is important to do so, especially now because we are going through a time when being a Christian takes considerable will and courage. We hear Paul warning about this danger in his own day. Religion in the New Testament times tended take radical emotional ways of expression – like the Gospel for today – in the face of the radical and threatening nature of the age in which it was born it was a way to get people’s attention.

“Stir up O Lord the wills of thy faithful people, that richly bearing the fruit of good works, we may by thee be richly rewarded”.

Spirituality that has the commitment of our will as well as our feelings issues in our involvement in real ways with other people and the world. It remains faithful and perseveres when things are not easy. It takes up the cross, a hard saying...an even harder task.

What is the reward? -- The deep sense of meaning and purpose and hope which we gain and are called to share from having such a commitment to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and his kingdom of love. Amen+