

September 4th, 2022

Year C: Proper 23 (Psalm 139:1-6,13-18; Philemon: 1-21; Luke 14: 25-33)

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Today's gospel reading is one that really inspires preachers: to fake illness, or run a mile! Or to find an excuse to preach on something else. The epistle offers a very interesting alternative with its little story about the slave Onesimus being accepted as a full member of the Christian church by his master.

The master, Philemon, is being challenged to live up to his professed beliefs in a way that he might find uncomfortable. The slave is a possession that he is being asked to give up. He is also being asked to deny the values of the society that he was brought up in. He has to decide whether his faith means more to him than those things.

When you look at it like that, the story of Philemon is saying pretty much the same thing that the gospel reading says. It just says it in a gentler way that removes it from our reality. Having to free our slaves isn't going to be a big problem for any of us. But hating our family members and giving up all or our possessions? Ouch! What does a preacher do with that?

Well, I'll tell you what they do: they hit the books. Are there cultural or linguistic booby traps here? Does the exact sequence of this passage in the life of Jesus cast some light on what it means? And what wisdom can the experts can shed on it?

On the linguistic front, we find that there is an idiom in the Aramaic language which affects the meaning of the word we translate as "hate." This figure of speech doesn't necessarily involve emotional animosity against something; it expresses priorities. So, "loving" one thing and "hating" another would mean giving greater priority to one over the other. That softens the statement a little, but even then, giving your discipleship **priority** over your relationship with your children, or your family is still a really big thing to ask.

On the contextual front, we are told that Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. He was heading into a very dangerous situation. By this time he was attracting huge crowds of followers wherever he went, and in an occupied country, under military law, that's a problem. Many of the followers were serious, but more than a few were hangers-on, tagging along for cheap entertainment.

Perhaps Jesus thought they really needed a serious warning to think about what they were doing. And so he warned them: if you really want to come with me, it's going to cost you – just make sure you understand that before you come. And then he offered two really interesting illustrations to make his point.

The message of the first illustration seems to be "Don't start what you can't finish." The building of a tower was a necessity for protecting the crop, so if the tower wasn't built, the crop might be lost. But if the owner tried to build the tower and ran out of money, he would lose his crop and look foolish to boot.

Being a follower of Jesus at that particular time was a dangerous thing, and getting more dangerous by the minute. Becoming a follower meant being willing to face all the dangers that were ahead. It wasn't just a fashionable distraction; it was life-and-death serious, and followers needed to be aware of what they were taking on. They needed to think seriously about whether they could afford to see this through.

The message of the second illustration seems to be very much the same: "Don't start a fight you can't win." But then it seems to offer another alternative: "If you know you can't win, negotiate"? The wise experts wouldn't agree with me, but it strikes me that this is precisely what most of us do when our Christianity is challenged by some of the really hard teachings of Jesus.

Hard teachings like "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." We know right away that we aren't going to do that, any more than we are going to turn our backs on our families. Even if we allow for the influence of language and context and interpretation, it's still a rather tall order, and we know we can't do that. So we negotiate. We evaluate our resources and our obligations and we work something out.

Of course, we could just say "That's too hard. Forget it!" and walk away. The greater majority of our neighbours find it just too demanding to make time to go to church at all, let alone to commit to supporting the work of the church with their time and resources. But we're here, so we've taken those decisions and made our choices.

Fortunately, being a Christian is not a dangerous choice in our neighbourhood. It may be unfashionable, but it's not dangerous, (yet!). There are plenty of places on this planet where it is a very dangerous choice indeed. Often a fatal one. But our safety from outright persecution doesn't mean that we never have to make difficult choices.

As Christians, we look at ourselves and our lives, our relationships and our possessions, again and again, re-evaluating our resources and obligations, making new choices. We know that our possessions are not ours to keep forever; we aren't here for ever and we don't take anything with us when we go. Our possessions are ours to use while we're here, but as Christians we don't believe that life is all about accumulating "stuff" and hoarding it; we believe that it's about putting that stuff to good use.

That is even more true of the relationships we value most. We don't own the people we love – love must be given and received in freedom or it is meaningless. We all know the old saying about setting someone free if you love them. Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch prisoner of war, put it this way: "Hold everything with an open hand, because if God has to pry open your fingers, it hurts."

Maybe Luke included this little passage in his narrative because he wanted us to ask ourselves whether we are really serious about our faith? Are we willing to re-evaluate our resources and obligations and put them to good use? What exactly does being a Christian mean to us?

A chaplain at a large university to the south told a story about getting a telephone call from a really angry father once.

“I hold you personally responsible for this,” the father shouted at him.

“Me?” the chaplain asked.

The father was furious because his daughter, who had been ready to start a graduate program that fall, had just told him that she was going to take a year or two away from university to do humanitarian work with a church group in Haiti.

“It’s absurd!” the father shouted. “She has a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering and she’s going to dig ditches in Haiti.”

“Well,” the chaplain said, “I don’t suppose she did get much training in ditch digging in the Engineering Department, but she’ll get the hang of it soon enough.”

“This is not a joke!” the father yelled. “You encouraged her to do this. It’s all your fault.”

The chaplain pointed out that the parents had started this ball rolling. THEY were the ones who had her baptized. They read Bible stories to her, and took her to Sunday School. “You’re the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me” he said.

“But we only wanted her to be a good Christian!” said the father.

Hmm.