

Sunday 17th March – Mattins

Sermon by the Revd Ish Smale, Cathedral Deacon

Jeremiah 22 v 1-9 13-17 Luke 14 v 27-33

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

Let me start by asking you a question. When we read a 'Jesus quote' should we assume that it is meant for everyone, including us today?

I suggest we tend to be slightly selective.

For instance. When Jesus said privately to Peter feed my sheep, we assume that was meant for all in pastoral ministry. But when Jesus said to Peter get thee behind me Satan, we hope that was just meant for Peter.

OK. How about Luke 14 v 33.

So none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Some have read this verse and take it literally for today whilst others have ignored it and literally don't take it at all.

Hearing the story of St Francis whilst in Assisi, I think he took it literally.

Born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant he grew up living a very privileged life and his father had great ambitions lined up for him.

But after being taken prisoner for a year in battle and his father paying the ransom to have him released.... he began to see visions from God and heard God telling him to '*repair my church which is falling in ruins.*'

Responding to God he gave all of his wealth (or more accurately his father's wealth) to the Church...which did not please his father.

He left home and took a vow of poverty, formed an order of Monks and spent his life talking to animals, preaching to people and praying in solitude to God.

I too took this scripture quite literally when I first came to faith at the age of 19.

God called me to travel and share the Christian message using a guitar. I had no form of income and for a year a friend and I just lived in his van.

In the daytimes we would knock on people's doors and talk to people about Jesus, and in the evenings we would visit youth clubs and sing to people about Jesus.

At night we slept in his Bedford Dormobile in car parks which wasn't too bad as most car parks had public conveniences that stayed open all night remain, so it was sort of en-suite.

Of course, having long hair and living like missionary hippies did not impress all the 'suit and tie' church goers of the day but some did seem to catch onto our eccentric evangelism and gave us a meal whilst others gave us money... usually enough to move on to the next village or town.

A year of doing this was great training and I learned a lot about trusting God and not needing possessions.

However, once married with children things changed.

I still wanted to trust God and not things but I realised that I also now had a responsibility to provide for my family and make sure they had some stability and a roof over their heads.

Today, I confess I have far too many possessions. I keep many of my nostalgic treasures in the loft ready to pass onto my children but deep down I know that when I eventually leave this earth, my valuable memoirs will leave my loft soon after me... and be transported to the nearest charity shop or local tip!

To put Luke 14 v 33 into context Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem to be tortured and crucified. Still the crowd following Jesus had no idea of what He was about to go through. They were following him thinking that He was on His way to form a new empire.

His listeners needed to hear these strong words.

The word DISCIPLE here simply means someone who has been taught and trained.

Jesus was saying that anyone who thought that by following him they would receive worldly power and glory, had no right to call themselves one of his disciples.

Jesus Disciples were people who gave not gathered. His Disciples must be willing to sacrifice everything... even their lives.

But I think we must be careful about taking everything Jesus says with cold and unimaginative literalness.

Later in Luke when Jesus said his disciple must hate their loved ones and family, he did not mean that literally. He was saying that no love in life should compare with the love we should have for him.

And here, where Jesus said a disciple must give up everything, he was saying that we should value none of our possessions more than we value Him.

But did Jesus really expect all His disciples to give up and sell everything they owned?

Well he did not expect his 12 apostles to do so.

When he first met them, of course they left their possessions to follow him. There was no way they could follow Jesus over the mountains dragging a suit case full of 'things' around with them.

But Jesus never told them that they must first go home and sell all they owned. *In Mark 10 Peter* says to Jesus that we have LEFT everything to follow you. He doesn't say that we have GOT RID OF everything.

We know that they still owned things because soon after their calling Jesus went to the HOUSE of Simon and Andrew.

Only a few days after Jesus death, Peter went back to HIS FISHING NETS AND BOATS, it's very unlikely that he went out and bought new nets and boats in the middle of the night.

And after three years of following Jesus, the Apostle John still had a HOME to take Jesus' mother into. It's also possible Paul carried around some TENT SEWING KIT knowing there would be times that he would need to use it.

I am definitely not arguing in favour of materialism but I am arguing against the view that we cannot be a true disciple unless we live in poverty.

Throughout history it's been the giving of the wealthy that has kept the Church going and supported mission ministry. In Luke 8 we read that wealthy women even provided financial support for Jesus and His disciples.

Having wealth and possessions is not wrong but not being willing to part with them... seems to be!

So to sum up, Jesus is telling us that we must never to love anything we own more than we love him.

Jesus is telling us that we must be willing and ready to give away even our most treasured possessions, to follow Him.

That is the cost of true discipleship.

Let me finish on a quote from a more modern day true disciple who did sacrifice everything, even his life following Jesus, the martyr Jim Elliot.

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