

Cost of Discipleship

Let the dead bury the dead.

If there was a competition for the most shocking thing that Jesus ever said that saying would surely be in the top five. How could Jesus say such a thing to a son grieving for his father. If a vicar said something like that to a grieving family member, there would be big trouble. There would be letters of complaint to the Bishop, headlines in the local press. The poor priest would never live it down. In the aftermath he would probably be sent on some pastoral awareness course to hone his inter personal skills before being discreetly moved to a new parish where there would be more sheep than people.

So how did Jesus get away with it? Well in fact the words are little less insensitive than they at first appear. Given the Jewish burial laws, the son would hardly be having a conversation with Jesus if his father had just died. The Jewish burial laws were and are strict. Someone who has died should ideally be buried within 24 hours. So, if his father had just died, the son would have been fully pre-occupied. More likely, the son, when he said that he needed to bury his father was referring to the Jewish custom of collecting the bones of the deceased 12 months after their original burial, so they could be placed in the family grave. So many Biblical scholars think that the son was saying to Jesus – ‘give me a year or so and then I will follow you!’ Or alternatively, the son may be saying ‘look my father is old and I need to look after him until he dies and then after that, I will follow you’. Either way it was a delaying tactic. The man is saying to Jesus, ‘Yes I will follow you but not yet, not now’. Following Jesus was being kicked into the long grass.

The two other stories into today’s gospel reading are also about what it means to follow Jesus. The first man in today’s Gospel is over enthusiastic. He says to Jesus: ‘I will follow you wherever you go’. He clearly hasn’t thought through the consequences of following Jesus. Jesus shatters any illusions the man may have had. Following Jesus is no easy choice. ‘Foxes have their holes, birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’. In other words, Jesus is saying ‘don’t commit yourself until you know what you’re letting yourself in for’. And as for the third man in today’s gospel who wants to go home to say goodbye to his family and friends before following Jesus, he also gets short-shrift. Jesus tells him the time of decision is now. He needs to live for the present and the future and not the past. ‘No one who sets his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God’.

Being a disciple of Jesus is not for the faint hearted. This is a constant theme of Jesus’ teaching – ‘Those who would be my disciples, must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. a thread which runs through all the gospels. Many would be followers of Jesus are like the three men in today’s Gospel. They are full of good intentions. They desperately want to follow Jesus but things get in the way whether it be family attachments, riches and possessions or just a shallow enthusiasm which is all hot air and no substance.

These sayings of Jesus are difficult because we can readily identify with those three men. It makes us think about how we might have responded to Jesus’ call to follow him. I suspect that if we are honest, our discipleship would have been conditional on one thing or another. We would have found it difficult to be like those fishermen Peter, James and John who just abandon their nets and boats, their families and livelihood to follow Jesus. And even today our following of Jesus has, more often than not, caveats and limitations attached to it. So, what does it mean today to be a follower of Jesus?

The three stories from today's gospel reading have a prominent part to play in a little book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was written in 1937 by a young 31 year old German theologian called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, who was a great friend and collaborator of Bishop George Bell, is one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. His theology was formed and moulded by his opposition to the evil of Hitler and Nazism and he died a martyr for his faith.

The reason those three stories were important to Bonhoeffer is because they are examples of people who thought following Jesus was easy. They were keen to follow Jesus, they paid lip service to following Jesus, but they didn't count the cost, they hadn't foreseen the sacrifice.

And Bonhoeffer saw the parallels with his own day. Hitler was in power, wicked laws were being enacted, unspeakable things were being done to people like the Jews; and what were the German Christians doing about it? For the most part, the answer is nothing. They carried on going to Church, hearing the Scriptures being read, listening to sermons being preached, and receiving Holy Communion. And what difference did it make to their lives? That's what worried Bonhoeffer. If being a Christian meant following Christ who confronted evil and was crucified for confronting it, how could German Christians simply turn a blind eye to evils of Nazism.

Bonhoeffer, like many Germans, was a Lutheran Christian. One of the central pillars of Lutheranism is the great insight of the Reformer Martin Luther that we are saved by faith alone. There is nothing we can do, no works that we can perform to win our salvation. All of that has been done by God in Christ. It's an important belief. But Bonhoeffer saw the weakness in it. It meant that Christians could see themselves as passive and non-confrontational. They were saved through their faith and they didn't need to do anything else, they didn't need to oppose and stand up against evil.

And that passivity is what happened. German Christians came to church and received communion week by week but it didn't change their lives. There was no cost to their discipleship, no sacrifice. For Bonhoeffer, it was faith without the Cross, without Christ. And the grace at the heart of such a faith was easily attained with no struggle. Bonhoeffer called it cheap grace and it was all about a comfortable, undemanding faith, a comfortable undemanding life.

In Christ, we don't see cheap grace. We see the cost of grace: it is the Cross. Following Jesus always leads to suffering and sacrifice and those are the hallmarks of his disciples. The question Bonhoeffer asks time and time again is what difference does faith make to our lives? How are our lives changed by following Jesus and are we prepared for that change? Or do we instead opt for a comfortable, undemanding faith?

I remember at University, a fellow student had a poster on his all wall, which has always stayed with me. It was words in the form of a question. It simply said 'If you were arrested and tried for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you'. I wonder.