

Really, Jesus?

‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate, father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters- everything-life itself, cannot be my disciple’. Is this Jesus engaging in hyperbole, or Luke getting a bit steamed up?

These surely can't be the words of Gentle Jesus, meek and mild? While the Gospel does elsewhere have phrases that comfort the disturbed, this section surely disturbs the comfortable.

Linguistic scholars tell us that this juxtaposition of two such strong sentiments is a feature of the ancient semitic languages, like Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, about expressing preference and not absolutes. But there is something to be said,

perhaps, for letting this seemingly rash statement just sit in our minds for a bit. We can't just smooth over or omit the bits of scripture we don't like- we have to let them settle in us and find a way through them, however alien they are. And in the reading form Philemon- we have another such example of hard talk. Of a runaway slave. Paul urges, that his master is to treat this slave as a loved brother in the faith. Excellent. But there's no suggestion, in the text however, that, Philemon ought to get his house in order and banish the evil of slavery- however much we believe slavery to be anathema to the Gospel. It is tricky to read a text from another world, another time another culture and just plain dangerous to make easy, too easy, parallels into our own worlds.

So what do we do with these readings?

It does seem to me that each of them is about choices. From the Old Testament- it's seemingly very clear- choose life. The writer uses a binary approach. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, by loving God and walking in his ways, you shall be blessed.

If you choose not to: them, you shall perish. Ha! If only life were that simple, eh?

In the Gospel today Jesus gives examples on a grand scale, towers and wars. Now, we at St Luke's may indeed have to think hard about how much we will need to spend to replace the roof on this building in a few years, but as yet the quinquennial report is still fairly positive about the tower! Towers and

wars. Of course in the big things – whether national- the NHS taxation, energy prices, or domestically, higher education for children or a house extension or a change in lifestyle, we need to calculate the cost: One might hope that rulers of nations might sit down and calculate the cost of wars, before they engage in them, but I don't think there's much evidence in current state violence that this is the way.

Paul, on the other hand, relates a very personal example of choice- but no less indicative. The slave Onesimus, was a runaway. We don't know what he'd done or witnessed, why he ran, but he has sought out Paul, a friend of his owner, Philemon. Paul, in this very personal letter, perhaps his only letter to an individual, rather than a christian

community, argues that out of their love for each other, as equal partners in the faith, Philemon reaccept him as a beloved brother (though still a slave).

The implication is that if we can get these relatively small things right, perhaps there is hope in us getting the bigger things right too. Without, therefore, wishing to sound too folksy, perhaps these texts are encouraging us to make choices in the small things, consistent with the love of Christ, and the bigger things will fall into place, or at least into a clearer perspective. Few decisions are as simple and binary as Deuteronomy seems to suggest. Even the small issue of this runaway slave is going to prove

problematic for all to face up to resolving. But while the devil may be in the detail, so is salvation. For the risky decision to take this Jesus road, discipleship, as we call it, comes at a price. The warnings to calculate the cost of the building the tower or waging war, are not there to discourage discipleship, but to allude to the risk of walking in this way. Perhaps the greatest reflection on this in recent years is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Cost of Discipleship*. To walk as a Disciple of Christ will always mean to bear the cost- in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth was prepared to do. To bear the love of God for myself and for my neighbour- to lay down self and take on love, even when it means losing our place at the dinner party or bonus payment at work, return on investments or status

down your street. Standing for love for truth, for justice, for God, costs.

This week we celebrated the life of John Bunyan in the Church of England's calendar, imprisoned for speaking out and following his conscience- for he who started his Pilgrim's Progress as an individual journeying on through despond, with the advice of Mr Worldly wiseman and the temptation of Vanity Fair, comes to the destination, the celestial city only in the company of his wife and children, in communion, with Faithful and others, We journey each, making our own choices, weighing up the costs, but arrive in the kingdom alongside and for each other.

No, Not hating one another, but rather, bearing the cost of loving one another and asking forgiveness for all that separates us.

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