

2nd Sunday after Trinity (Proper 6, Year A)

Matthew 9.35 – 10.8 [9-23]

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St Luke's, Chelsea

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'Cheap grace' exclaimed the famous German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 'Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.'¹

'Cheap grace' is the means by which Christians find themselves able to 'live like the rest of the world'.² 'Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate'.³

Contrast that to costly grace. 'Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. ... [I]t is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him'.⁴

Bonhoeffer knew what he was talking about. He grew up in early twentieth-century Germany, the son of a university professor. In the 1920s his reputation grew as a significant theologian for the next generation. But as Nazi control grew, he saw the ungodly nature of their regime. By the time published those words in 1937, he was a sidelined figure, in charge of a small and illegal theological college in north-east Germany. As Bonhoeffer saw it, the German church had opted for 'cheap grace'. It had opted to keep celebrating the sacraments, to keep gathering for its polite worship each Sunday morning, and to ignore the demonic activities that were going on around it. The church had turned its back on the 'costly grace' that is the true calling of the church. That is

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p.3 (the opening words of the book).

² Idem., p.3

³ Idem., p.4.

⁴ Idem., p.4

grace because it is a true following of Christ. It is costly because it is a true following of Christ. Christians need to know, as the title of Bonhoeffer's book put it, 'the cost of discipleship'.

Hearing today's gospel reading, it is hard not to hear some resonances of that cost. Here is Matthew's account of the sending out of the disciples, in the early stages of Jesus' ministry. The fields, Jesus proclaims, are ripe for harvest. And so we are introduced to Jesus' twelve disciples, that rag-tag gang of tax collectors, revolutionaries, fishermen, and the like. Out they go into the world. Their mission is somewhat limited: not yet the 'go ... and make disciples of all nations' of the Great Commission, but instead a sending just to the Jewish people. And as they go, they are to imitate the work of Christ: to proclaim 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'; to 'cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons'.

This is no sunny day trip for the disciples. Jesus goes on to insist they must take nothing with them – no money, no bag, no spare clothes – but rely on the hospitality of those around them. And he warns them that they will face great suffering. They are being sent out 'like sheep into the midst of wolves'; they must 'be wise as serpents and innocent as doves'. They are to put into action the words that we hear so often from Jesus' mouth: that call to 'take up their cross' and follow him.⁵ Theirs is not a path of cheap grace. They were to know the cost of discipleship.

There's a great deal of talk in the Church today of the Christian life as 'discipleship'. Listen to conversations within the Church of England; read the official reports, and the work of growth in the Christian life is called 'discipleship'. We are all disciples, following in the path of those first disciples.

And there is indeed much truth in that image.

⁵ The disciples have 'received without payment'. The grace may be costly: but it is also given as a gift.

Like the disciples, to be a Christian is to be an apprentice. Maybe not quite like they enjoyed with Jesus, but for us as apprentices in the community of faith in which the Spirit of Christ dwells.

Like the disciples, our apprenticeship will involve learning. And yes, that does involve learning, as individuals and as a community, about how we might read the Bible and think theologically today. But we are also learning from one another the way of Christ: the way of 'compassion and love; of humility and sacrifice, and of endurance and hope.'⁶

What's more, like the disciples, we are all apprentices. Christ is the teacher. We are the not very 'gifted and talented' students who are following his lead. So it doesn't matter our age, or our education; whether we wear a dog collar or not; whether we have been a Christian for one year or forty; we all have something to offer, and we all have something to learn.

And like the disciples, we are called to live out our apprenticeship as we go out: to make disciples of all nations, whatever opposition we may face.

We are, in many ways, disciples. But I want to insert a significant warning here. Christians haven't always been called 'disciples'. The church's talk of 'discipleship' is really a phenomenon from the 1970s onwards.⁷ It draws from Bonhoeffer and his undoubtedly powerful story. It's a reaction against the kind of Christianity that Bonhoeffer faced in 1930s Germany: perhaps similar to the kind of Christianity that was just beginning to fade away in postwar Britain. That was the kind of faith that saw Christianity as the socially respectable thing to do. It was a Christianity that celebrated the connections of church and state, and which gave the sense that Christianity made you an important member

⁶ To quote Paula Gooder, *Let me go there*, p.11.

⁷ I don't have definitive evidence for this. Google's NGram viewer shows a great increase in the use of the term 'discipleship' in the English language from 1975 onwards:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=discipleship&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3. It is somewhat puzzling that the equivalent German, 'Nachfolge', had its

high point in 1840 and has broadly declined since then:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=nachfolge&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=de-2019&smoothing=3.

of society – but it was a Christianity which had lost sight of the ways it might find itself called to be a prophetic voice towards the state.

The language of discipleship reminds us that our calling as Christians is more than just a peaceful, enjoyable gathering once or twice a week. It is a call to follow in the path of those disciples, even as sheep among wolves.

But there's a way, I might add, that our calling differs from those disciples. Jesus called the disciples to leave everything they had and to follow him. Most of us are called to a task that is, if anything, more difficult than that. We are called to stay where we are. We are called to stay in the midst of our compromised, messy lives: to work through the difficulties of life with our family; to remain in the web of financial commitments we have entered into; to rebuild those relationships with our difficult neighbours. Sometimes it might seem that it would be easier, like the disciples, to leave it all behind. But, for most of us, this is the place where we are called to. This is the place where we are called to follow in the way of Christ.

That calling to his place is one that Bonhoeffer knew. In June 1939, as the storm clouds of war gathered, he left Germany and sailed for New York. A seminary there had offered him job, aware of the danger he was in in Germany. But when Bonhoeffer arrived in New York, he realised he had made a mistake. His calling, he sensed, was in fact to be in Germany with his fellow Germans, and to share in their trials. Two weeks after he had arrived in New York, he set sail again – this time back to Germany. In the midst of war he stood up with courage for justice, until, just two weeks before end of the war, Hitler gave the command for him to be shot.

The Christian life might take us, like the disciples, to as-yet unseen lands. It might also, like Bonhoeffer, call us to where we are – in the midst of our own tangled lives. But whatever the place, there's one thing that the call to discipleship is not. It is not cheap grace, that lets us remain as we are. There is a cost to following Christ. But in that costly grace there is life. And that life is life eternal.