

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 4th September 2022 (Trinity 12)

Philemon: 1 - 21

Psalm 1

Luke 14: 25 - 30, 33

'The Cost of Discipleship'

Good Morning, both those of you here in church and those joining us on Zoom; you are all very welcome.

Let's Pray.

We have two rather different readings today - what did you make of them?? What challenged you? What was interesting? What was hard to understand? What were they all about and how may they affect us today?? ... Thank you

Perhaps not surprisingly, I want to concentrate first on our Gospel reading.

It is really challenging, but can be quite easily misunderstood.

The two short parables about 'counting the cost before starting a project like building a house, or even starting a war!' are 'framed' at beginning and end by very stark health and wealth warnings. The real cost of following Jesus / the 'crunch', if you like.

We're told a large group, or many groups, of people were 'following along' with Jesus. But, 'following along' certainly doesn't mean they were committed followers, or believers; no doubt many of them were just there out of curiosity. Jesus was not, and is not, impressed by large crowds of people; and He wanted to check they were not there under any misunderstanding.

We need to understand, quite clearly, that the Christian Faith is not a travelling miracle show. Jesus did, and still does remarkable things for people. But being a disciple requires *total commitment*.

Another word for a disciple is an '*apprentice*' – *An apprentice* watches his master, works under His direction and learns from what He does. - So a disciple of Jesus needs to be able to copy and learn from the way He lived, and died.

Jesus does not mince His words because He doesn't want anyone to join, or 'enlist' without reading the small print! As the two parables indicate, whoever commits themselves to Jesus, and to proclaiming the Gospel, needs to be as sure as they can that they will be able to finish the job; it's not necessarily about doing it in their own strength but watching Jesus, taking strength, encouragement and example from Him.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ demanded then, and still demands now, total commitment and a willingness to make very real sacrifices.

Jesus knew that many of those who stuck with Him, and followed Him while He was on earth, would also have to follow Him to the foot of His cross. Indeed, many of them would, later, suffer similar fates themselves. Thousands of early Christian disciples died brutal deaths, simply because they refused to renounce their faith in Jesus.

Sadly in much of our, relatively safe, modern Western world, these warnings have become 'sanitised' – or diluted. It's not fashionable to talk about persecution and suffering. 'Carrying our Cross' is a phrase, which has become devalued, and is now often used to refer to problems with the mother-in-law, or a difficult neighbour.

But, don't be misled – we need to be aware that the threat of suffering, in the service of Jesus, is still very real. In the twentieth century, there were more Christian martyrs around the world than in all other centuries since Jesus' death, added together?

Ordinary people, like friends we knew in Scotland for example, Tharcisse and Josephine from Rwanda – they knew what 'carrying their cross' really means. – Forced to leave their country, in fear of their lives, and unable to return, because of their stand for their faith. Or, Josephine's sister, abducted, beaten senseless, tortured – and worse – by soldiers, and left permanently injured, simply because she was a Christian teacher. Or, my friend Hilmy, in Malaysia, of whom I've spoken before, – kicked out by his father and disinherited, when he announced he'd been baptised a Christian. All of them were prepared to put their faith in Jesus before anything else, and to make a total commitment to Him.

I've often wondered whether I will be brave enough to have that kind of resolute faith, if I'm ever called upon to make a stand for Jesus?

What do you think will happen to the church in Europe, if serious persecution of Christians ever returns? Will it finally collapse – as many prophets of doom have predicted for years? Or, will it regain its strength, and flourish? What connects these people? In a single word – Faith!

God asks us, just what He asked of the Israelites in the wilderness, and the crowd of would be disciples following Jesus. He asks us to trust Him, and to be willing to make a total commitment to Him – the commitment of true faith.

And, for the record, I firmly believe, if we are prepared to make such a commitment of faith in Jesus, He will empower us and it will enable us, His Church, to grow from strength to strength, whatever is happening around us.

And just a quick look at the short letter from the Apostle Paul to Philemon, which was our first reading and is probably a good example of the kind of sacrifices we may be expected to make. Paul was writing from Rome to his friend Philemon, a local church leader, about Onesimus - who was originally a slave who 'belonged to' Philemon.

Onesimus had run away from Philemon's service, and had somehow ended up working for Paul who was imprisoned - or under house arrest - in Rome.

It has always seemed to me that Paul was exerting considerable pressure on Philemon, because he is using his friendship (and the fact that he brought Philemon to faith), to reconcile Philemon and Onesimus. So that Philemon would not only reinstate Onesimus as his slave, but far more, give Onesimus his freedom.

Paul is gently, or perhaps not quite so gently, reminding Philemon that in his Christian faith God has given him the ultimate freedom in life; and that, following Jesus' example, Philemon should similarly give Onesimus his freedom too.

It was, of course, a big ask - a healthy slave would have been worth a lot of money. But, in a roundabout way, Paul is saying this is the kind of commitment a Christian should make to a brother or sister in Christ.

We, almost certainly, do not have servants, or slaves, but we may well have other things that our commitment to faith in Jesus requires us to sacrifice in our Christian service. (e.g When we answered God's call to come to Grenoble, I found out I could not bring my brand new dream car, which I'd bought just a year earlier and had to sell at a considerable loss.)

But we have the assurance that, whatever we give up, will never be anything like what Jesus gave up for us. The privilege of serving Jesus far outweighs any loss of human whims, or possessions.

Indeed, our Christian faith may often demand even greater sacrifices from us; but the gift of eternal life with Jesus, worshipping God face to face, is worth immeasurably more than any pearl of great price, or whatever dreams, or idols, we may want to surround ourselves with.

So, as we go out from here let us all consider how God may invite each one of us to use our faith as Christian disciples – His apprentices – in our community this week.

Now, as I close Let's Pray ...