



# 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

## Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 4 September 2022

### READINGS

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-18; Philemon 1:21; Luke 14:25-33

## *The Cost of Discipleship*

Greetings Friends.

The German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is probably most well-known, at least within evangelical circles, for his *The Cost of Discipleship*. An oft-quoted line from this book reads: “When Christ calls a man (sic.), he bids him come die.” Bonhoeffer later lamented the militant tone of this work and certainly, by the time of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (published posthumously), his exacting stance, though not on issues of conscience (as his martyrdom illustrates) had lessened.

Does the sentiment expressed in this quote resonate then at all with our Gospel reading set for today? “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own... life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26) May I venture to say that, conventionally, the message from this passage is distilled as one of sacrifice. The notion or image of picking up your cross is taken to indicate the necessity of self-sacrifice and death to self. But even if we use such exacting language, as Bonhoeffer did in his *Cost of Discipleship*, I wonder if we miss the full import of what Jesus is saying. And this, once again, may be attained by returning to the central symbol of the Christian faith, the cross.

“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27) I have used the English Standard Version here because, although it does not use inclusive language, it is more faithful to the Greek. The Greek contains the masculine possessive pronoun “his,” as in “his cross”. For some reason, the NRSV omits this and refers to “the cross” in general. Inadvertently perhaps, this highlights an important point which is namely that, on one level, each person has their own unique cross to bear. Before saying more about this, let us consider what Jesus is implying in making this assertion.

It was common knowledge at the time that the cross represented a form of Roman execution or capital punishment for those guilty of the crime of sedition, i.e. subjects of Rome who sought to undermine it. In as much as it was a form of execution, as with all forms of execution, it was also meant to dissuade people from such crimes and, to that end, was extremely violent. It was also a very shameful way to die because, in addition to being publicly labelled a criminal, one was crucified naked and left on the cross indefinitely, thereby not being buried. In antiquity, there was no greater shame than not being buried properly. The action of “picking up and carrying one’s cross” derives from the practice, made famous in the Passion narratives, of victims of crucifixion having to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion.

Therefore, when Jesus tells his hearers to each take up their own cross and follow him, he is saying something quite specific. He is saying to ultimately anticipate death; he is saying to anticipate great shame and humiliation (of which we will say more in a minute); and he is saying to oppose Roman rule and hegemony. Now we can think of Jesus as being a pacifist and politically quietist, but this does not really accord with the information we have.

Firstly, the fact of Jesus' crucifixion alone indicates that the Jewish and Roman authorities viewed his ministry and mission as seditious and subversive. Based on what the Gospels tell us, it seems likely that Jesus did not pay tax and encouraged his disciples to do likewise. Again, according to information in the Gospels, at Jesus' behest, his disciples procured weapons. In the last instance, it seems that Jesus did not engage in public violence (although see John 2:15) but what had these weapons been intended for? Lastly, although it is probably true to say Jesus was not one, he bears some similarity to first-century Jewish bandits. These were young, disenfranchised but politically and ideologically motivated men, who understood that Roman rule was the bane of much of their plight.

Suddenly then, the call to take up one's cross and follow Jesus, in its historical context, appears more radical and politically charged. How then are we to understand this injunction in our own day? As mentioned earlier, we each have our own, unique cross to bear. It likely does not entail a physical death, although physical trauma or suffering may be a part of it. I think a clue is in the two parable-like analogies Jesus uses to illustrate his point.

Again, we think of these analogies, that of landowner building a tower, and that of a king going to war, as communicating the importance of "counting the cost". In our pursuit to follow Jesus, we must "count the cost" so we know what is at stake! We can view these fairly simple analogies in different ways. Instead of Jesus using them as illustrations of situations one should avoid, i.e. failing to complete a building project, or being conquered by a better-resourced enemy, perhaps he is using them to suggest that these are precisely the situations you must expect and anticipate.

The ridicule, shame and public humiliation of failing to complete a building project is similar to that experienced on the (literal) cross, and must be endured if one is to follow Christ. Likewise, defeat in battle, which can likely mean death or slavery, is also a necessary part of the journey of descent which the cross and Paschal mystery represent. But all of this, as it would have been two thousand years ago in Jesus' own iteration, is entirely counter intuitive and not something we will willingly accept. Despite this, as we seek to be more faithful followers of Christ, we can be assured of God's love and grace.

Amen