

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> September

Deuteronomy 30:15-end

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

A couple of weeks ago we were thinking about a short passage from Luke's gospel which quite possibly took some of us by surprise. In it Jesus said he had come to bring division rather than peace. In Matthew's version of the same incident Jesus talks of bringing a sword rather than peace. Not the kind of things we would expect from the one we may know as the Prince of Peace.

So what do we do when we get to such passages in scripture. A question its worth asking as we have another to wrestle with today.

*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*

Do we ignore these kinds of passages, do we turn the pages of our Bible until we find passages that are more suited to what we want and more in tune with our own thinking or do we read them carefully and try to understand what they really mean? And these thoughts about addressing passages that we don't much like echo some of what I was saying last week about listening to people who don't reinforce our own views, who challenge us in some way. And this week of all weeks – when we have seen our Prime minister unable to accept that there are sound and sensible and honest politicians who have different views from the ones he has – is a good week to think about such things.

Today's gospel reading is in fact about discipleship. Discipleship – that's a word we probably only ever use in church circles. We have no other context in which to use the word and help us tease out all its meanings and implications. And that's always dangerous, because we often then don't grasp its full meaning. It becomes a jargon word that we all assume we know what it means and no one questions. But in truth we probably don't have its full meaning in mind.

So what do we understand by the word? What should we understand by the word? These are questions we were thinking about on Wednesday at the first session of the Moving On course. A disciple is a follower, in the sense of a follower of a teacher or tutor, a disciple is someone who is learning and developing, modelling their thoughts and actions on those of the teacher. And follower also implies some kind of movement, some kind of progression, some kind of development, some kind of change and growth.

And so on Wednesday we asked the question about our own positions. We might call ourselves Christians, we might have been confirmed many years ago, we might be regulars at church services and activities, but do we see in our own lives this movement, this progression, this development, this change and this growth with regard to our faith in God and the way it translates to our daily words and deeds?

A distinction was made on Wednesday between someone whose faith is just about attending church, and someone for whom their faith determines all that do and all that they are, someone who follows Jesus every day, who wants to learn more about what their faith means to them in terms of how they live in the world and relate to others and to God.

On Wednesday we watched this video clip of a woman called Vikki who told her story of moving from attender to disciple. I thought it could be helpful to see it now.

### **WATCH DVD CLIP**

And its that kind of distinction that Vikki is talking about that gives us the clue to how to understand Jesus' comments in this reading today. He is talking of those who follow him and is using hyperbole to emphasise his point that following him should be the most important thing in our lives – even more important than our families. That, I think, puts the distinction between attender and disciple into perspective.

But how do we do what Vikki did? How do we make that move.

First we have to count the cost – Jesus speaks in the gospel reading about the tower builder and the king going into battle. The need to think about what will be involved. Have we got the desire, the resources, the determination to carry it forward?

Being a disciple is not an easy option, but as Vikki says it's a wonderful roller coaster journey. Jesus says his followers must be prepared to carry their own cross – indicating I think that some might find the road as tough as he. And we know that – especially in the early years of the church, but also today in some places in the world – to be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus means that you might have to put your life on the line.

Now I don't think that will be the case for any of us. But there are costs. As followers of Jesus we are expected to care for those who have little, to watch out for those on the margins. We could become involved in all kinds of things from refugee charities to food banks. And this could cost us much in terms of time, energy and money. As followers we are expected to be part of the church – not simply attending on a Sunday morning, but taking part in mission activities like Messy Church, like Open the Book, involvement in course like Start and Moving On, or taking a role in the Journeys.

And it may just be in the way we lead our ordinary and apparently mundane lives. There's a prayer that we sometimes use after communion which contains these words and sums this up

***May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;  
we who drink his cup bring life to others;  
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.***

So its about living a life like that of Jesus, bringing life to others in all kinds of ways – giving value and recognition, showing love or whatever, and its about giving light to the world – shining the light of God's truth and love on those around us. And for all these the costs could be in terms of time, energies and money – but also the effect that it will have on family, friendships, leisure activities and a whole lot more.

Being a disciple can mean we have to swim against the tide, be the one who stands out, act in ways that others find hard to comprehend. Our NT reading from the letter to Philemon gives a good illustration of this. Philemon was a Christian, but also a wealthy individual. He was, as most people in those days were, a slave owner. One of his slaves – Onesimus – had run away and probably stolen some money in the process, and he had found himself somehow in the company of the apostle Paul and had become a Christian. Paul

had taken a liking to him – he says that Onesimus was like a son to him. And Paul is, at much cost to himself, sending Onesimus back to Philemon, and imploring Philemon not to treat him as a slave (which he was entitled to do of course – in fact running away as a slave was a capital offence), but to treat him as a brother – as an equal. And if this was to be hard for Paul in losing one like a son, and hard for Philemon in accepting his runaway slave back as an equal think how hard it would be for Onesimus – having to face up to his past and rely on grace and mercy. For all 3 living the Christian way of discipleship was a tough call.

Now cast your mind back to that DVD and Vikki's story. Vikki was speaking about how she had weighed up the costs, what she would lose, the parts of her life that she didn't want to hand over to God. It was, she said, a hard decision, but one that was so worth it. We don't know what the stumbling blocks were – maybe parts of her lifestyle, maybe relationships, maybe having to face up to the past – but they were real and made the choice all the more difficult.

Our reading from Deuteronomy really sums up all that we have been saying. Moses is challenging the people of Israel to make the right choice, to become followers of God. He implores them to make the choice for life – Choose life he pleads.

And that same challenge is before each one of use. Continue as we are now – content maybe as church attenders and people who lead good lives, or become disciples, followers. Commit everything to Jesus, become 24/7 Christians offering all to him.

Moses says the choice is between life and death. Perhaps we might find it hard to see it quite in those terms. Maybe we can pick on some of Jesus' teaching about life in its fullness and say the choice is between life as we know it and life in its fullness. And, like Moses, I plead that you choose life in its fullness.

The Moving on course continues on Wednesday, and gives us some more opportunities to think some more about what this discipleship is all about and how it can bring fulfilment to us. I invite you to join us!