

Sermon 13/10/24 Mark 10:17-31

The cost of discipleship

It must be the best part of twenty years since I found myself standing on the Mount of Olives, looking out over Jerusalem and thinking that it was hard to be a Christian in the Holy Land. The number of Christians living there was falling, and I had noticed that the people looking after the holy places we had visited seemed to be getting older than they were when I had been there before. Imagine my surprise then when the leader of an adjacent party announced with great certainty, 'It is easy to be a Christian in the Holy Land'.

Ironically it seems probable that we were both right. She meant that on a group visit, in the company of highly committed Christians, carried along by their enthusiasm, having the Bible brought to life by experiencing the places mentioned, the whole Christian story assumes a greater reality. I was thinking from the point of view of the people looking after the historic sites for whom it must have felt like an increasing struggle, with financial and people resources declining. It is a matter of your viewpoint.

There is so much that is right about the young man in today's gospel reading. Although he was rich, he did not stand on his dignity but knelt, in respect, before Jesus. He recognised Jesus as 'good'. He knew and obeyed the commandments, he wanted to know what he should do to inherit eternal life – there was no expectation of entitlement. We can perhaps see a little of ourselves in him. But the price asked of him was too much. To sell what he had and give to the poor.

And, disappointed that the price was too high, he left.

Peter tried to get Jesus to define what is expected, after all the disciples had given up their jobs and homes to follow him, their families have been left behind. Like us he needs to be reminded that we are not in control – it is God who makes salvation possible, we cannot guarantee it. The simple set of rules that the young man, and Peter, wanted is not available.

The camel cannot get through the eye of the needle – that would just not be possible. As a beast of burden the camel is loaded with baggage, like we ourselves are loaded with baggage. We collect that over time. Material things become harder to leave behind the longer we have had them. But it is not just the material things that may be hard to leave, we have familiarity among places and friends.

There is a cost to discipleship. It can be as simple as curtailing our Saturday evening activity in order to be present at worship on a Sunday morning. I read recently of a man who joined a desert monastery and was shocked to realise that as well as leaving his friends in his native Italy, he also needed to sever his links to the extent of destroying his address book. In this Olympic year we have been reminded of the actions of Eric Lidell,

a runner who refused to compete on a Sunday, and who later became a missionary dying in internment in Japan. These people were willing to do what they felt their faith demanded of them.

What price would be too high for us? What would we be willing to do? At the last supper Peter declared that he would be willing to die for Jesus, but before the night was out he had denied knowing him. Are we willing to actively disagree with our friends when their views do not conform with our Christian viewpoint? I know of someone who walked out of a pub rather than listen to their friends' views on immigration because it seemed the only way to make them see that not everyone shared their view.

Jesus promises the disciples, and us, that when we make a big sacrifice for our faith we will be rewarded a hundred times more in our earthly lives, as well as in the future. How about the church that agreed for a whole year they would only fly for business or emergencies. One of their members explained that to honour this she would not be able to go on a walking trip abroad with some friends. When they heard this the friends respected the decision by switching the walking to Dorset. Perhaps not hundred times reward but in the vein of what Jesus was saying.

We may not understand what the way of discipleship feels like or the price that we are willing to pay until we are actually challenged. Are we able to actively welcome someone with whom we have nothing in common except our humanity? Can we put ourselves into their shoes and know what would make us feel welcome? It is only a small challenge but one that we should rise to if we believe that welcome into our community is important.

The rich young man is being asked to shed his baggage, perhaps not so much his wealth but his old life with his old life's expectations. Jesus is showing him a new world but to fully appreciate it he must look at it differently, not from a position of material wealth but of spiritual commitment.

I find myself back with that group leader, speaking from the companionship of the group who were sharing that experience of the Bible's places. Who were comfortable in the demands of their faith. And my own bleaker view of what was being asked daily of some of the Christian residents, our tour guide had queued for hours to be allowed through the wall to join up with us. But it is that commitment that keeps faith alive.

It would be great to find that faith in God gave us a permanent warm and fuzzy feeling inside, but the reality is that there is a cost to being a Christian. Discipleship is not always easy. But as Mark reminds us, whatever it is that we give up, we will be repaid a hundred times more.