

More often than not, it is Old Testament scripture that can seem rather harsh to modern ears, but this morning it is the New Testament, the gospel reading, that is easily the more challenging; Christ states that we cannot be a disciple unless we hate our parents, spouse, siblings, children, and our entire life. Not only is this a decidedly bleak instruction but it also appears to directly contradict what Christ declares as one of the two greatest commandments, to love one another. But before we start altering our wills and telling our relatives what we really think of them, we should perhaps be wary of taking this too literally. Instead, I think it is one of these occasions where Christ uses powerful and striking language to get his disciples, and our, attention. But at the same time it is far from just semantics - It is a salutary warning of what following him actually involves.

Christ reinforces his point with a couple of dramatic examples, describing the building of a tower and going to war, and as always, the imagery is no accident. As Rev Jon and the team well know, building something requires meticulous planning, with numerous hoops to jump through, opinions to be sought, and even the plight of bats to be considered. Christ reiterates this point with the idea of a king planning a military campaign, but if he is outnumbered rather than go into battle, he should simply capitulate

These examples highlight the importance of forethought, an awareness of the sacrifices that will have to be made in order to fulfil a commitment - In short, don't start what you can't finish. It brings to mind the somewhat ironic gravity of the wedding vows, where the joyous declaration of everlasting love is tempered with a series of sobering warnings, not to go into it 'lightly or selfishly, but reverently and responsibly', and I think that word responsibly is absolutely vital.

It brings us back to our reading from Jeremiah, where Rulers are instructed to do what is right, to protect the oppressed, to welcome strangers, to be compassionate to orphans and the bereaved. In other words it reflects that old adage that with great power, comes great responsibility, and there is no greater responsibility than following Christ. John chapter 15 states, 'you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit (and crucially) fruit that will last.' It is a blessing beyond our comprehension that the Lord of creation chose you and me. But in spite of this, I wonder if, like me, any of you have ever thought, said or done something, you know full well to be against God's will, safe in the knowledge that we are forgiven. Not only did I do wrong, but far worse, in doing it deliberately, I was horribly irresponsible with God's grace and forgiveness. And the passage from Jeremiah carries a stark warning, that even though we are loved like Gilead and Lebanon, dramatically beautiful and fertile regions of the promised land, if we break the covenant that we are fully aware of, we are in trouble. This is the tough love of God, exactly the same as a parent rebuking their child for doing something in the short term that could hurt them in the long term.

This brings us back to the examples of family in our gospel reading. I don't think for one moment Christ wants us to hate those we love and live for most; far from it, they are a rich blessing from God, people like our dear departed Evelyn; rather, our love and commitment to them is a measure, a template if you like, which our love and commitment to God needs to match and far exceed.

Now that is no small task – and an accepting that is actually very important. We cannot and will not fulfil our commitment to God by our own actions. So what do we do, how do we put God above all things when we are and always will be fundamentally flawed?

There are of course numerous ways that we know well - through prayer, through studying his word, through gathering here and sharing communion. But consider these things more broadly - they are all, fundamentally, acts of trust; we trust that God will hear our prayer, that he will talk to us through scripture, that he will accept our humble act of worship and be present in it. And that trust, that we of course call faith, is more important than the acts themselves because it is an acceptance and recognition that none of this is possible without him. It is memorably summed up in the words from verse 4 of Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, 'Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease.' That quietness comes from total faith in him; which in turn allows us to reject human accolades and earthly status symbols, and know a peace beyond anything this world can offer.

The well-known metaphor of salt that Christ uses in the gospel reading is particularly apt; Salt has been used to preserve since Egyptian times and as I am sure you know it preserves by enveloping food which prevents bacterial existence. In the same way allowing Christ's spirit to envelope us, to consider him in every aspect of our existence, will preserve us, in a life lived to serve his purpose.

Like all things worthwhile it takes time, a lifetime of commitment and sacrifice; there will be moments when we feel far from God; In a recent sermon at St Leonards Church, in Grateley where we now live, Rev Matthew described how he was practising Lectio 365, a daily devotional guide to scripture, meditation and prayer. One particular day the reading was taken from Psalms, but it was not speaking to Matthew and after only a few verses he admitted out loud, 'Dear Lord, I am bored' and sat for the remaining half hour feeling rather sorry for himself. He recounted this to a fellow member of the clergy who wisely observed that, while the prayer 'Dear Lord, I am bored' was unlikely to make it into the order of service, it was nonetheless almost certainly one of the most honest prayers he had ever said; the point being that it doesn't matter where we are – God will meet us there, if we trust him to do so.

He is asking us to surrender to him completely, with faith that there is something more important than our families and loved ones, more important than anything this earthly life has to offer, for good or ill.

I would like to leave you with the words of 19th century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson who sums it up perfectly - What lies behind us and what lies before us are but simple matters compared to what lies within us.

Amen.

Michael Grist, 16 March 2025