

THE SERMON - Pentecost 13 - September 8th, 2019.

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-18; Philemon 1-25; Luke 14: 25-35.

We have an interesting collection of readings this morning, none of which immediately seem to hang together.

First, we had a snippet from Deuteronomy. Part of Moses' lengthy farewell speech to the Israelites, before they head off, eventually, into the Promised Land without him.

Moses calls the Israelites to obedience of the commandments he gave them at Mount Sinai: loving the Lord, walking in God's ways and observing God's commandments, holding fast to God all their days, in order to receive the promised blessing.

Today I cheated a little and swapped the Psalm from the alternate to the one ordinarily set down in the Lectionary – Psalm 139, or a portion of it – because it is one of my very favourite psalms. I remember a few years ago, while on an Ignatian Retreat, spending the whole day with this psalm, reflecting and meditating on it, and found I was bathed in God's blessing.

You know me, Lord. You know where I am, what I am doing, how I think, who I am. You have always known me, even from when I was developing in my mother's womb.

How powerful are those words of reassurance, of love, of acceptance, how affirming!

Then, in our epistle reading, we have for the only time in the three-year liturgical cycle, a reading from Paul's letter to Philemon. And what is this letter about? A runaway slave who Paul has met in prison! It is interesting to note that at the end of the first century, there is a bishop named Onesimus in Ephesus. There has been speculation down the ages as to whether this is the same man, the former slave who met Paul in prison and became a devout believer!

And finally, we have this very difficult passage from Luke's Gospel, in fact, I think it is one of the most challenging in his gospel and it is this I want to focus on today.

Last week we heard Jesus talk about what it meant to be hospitable to the stranger. We heard Jesus admonish the guests at a dinner party for taking seats of honour, and then challenge his dinner host to stop inviting his friends to the table, but instead to invite those who were poor, crippled, lame, blind—in short, the marginalised in society and those who didn't look and act like the host or his normal circle of friends. That's a hard-enough message for us to hear - we like to be with those who are like us.

Today, however, we hear a different message in a different setting. The message is, on the face of it, even more challenging to us.

This week, we hear Jesus tell the crowds surrounding him that those who don't hate parents and family and "even life itself" cannot be his disciples. Further, we are called to carry the cross, otherwise we cannot be his disciples.

Hate our families? Carry the cross?

Again, we must ask ourselves what is Jesus trying to say to us? What are we to make of all this? How does it apply to our lives today in this place? As always, we must start with trying to put his words in their original context.

We must remember that in the society of Jesus' day, family was everything. People had no existence apart from their family. You had to do what the family did, and what the family needed you to do. Otherwise the whole family suffered. If a son left home when he was needed on the farm, the family could starve.² To be a disciple in the first century often meant you were in serious breach of society's expectations and often, literally deserting your family.

In our context, however, the challenge is different and yet the same. To be a disciple of Jesus is to put all of the cares and distractions of life in second place, and to put Christ first in one's life. It means we have to be willing to disagree with parents and children, friends and spouses. Some of you sitting here now may already be doing that. You have chosen to follow Christ and exercise your faith, even as you love, cherish, and celebrate your life and partnership with spouses, parents, or family members who are not Christian. It may sound contradictory, but it's *perfectly all right* to love your family and Jesus."^{1.1}

When I first became a Franciscan, I struggled with Francis' concept of poverty. I came to understand that for the First and Second Orders - the friars, sisters and enclosed nuns - that this generally did mean absolute poverty, nothing was owned by the individual, as much as was practical. But for the Third Order, how did that relate to us? Well I came to understand the concept of 'holding lightly' to my possessions. I may have possessions, earn money etc., but those possessions would not possess me. This might help a little to understand what Jesus is saying in this passage about 'hating' our loved ones.

It all boils down, however, to the word 'hate', the original Greek word, which is used in the gospel. The word translated as 'hate' is not meant as we understand or define the word in the 21st century. In the context of the first century Semitic community, to 'hate' in this context doesn't mean to 'emotionally loathe', but rather to have 'detachment, freedom from undue regard.'^{1.1}

After hearing Jesus call on his disciples to be willing to choose to follow in his footsteps over the desire of family and friends, he then calls on them to be prepared to die—to take up the cross. Remember, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem and all that that will bring to his life, Jesus is well-aware that the cost of discipleship for many of those who follow him won't be paid in gold and silver, but in flesh and blood. He doesn't want people to follow him without considering all that it means to be a disciple.^{1.1} He doesn't want half-hearted disciples who will balk at the first bit of opposition or difficulty.

You might remember the gospel some weeks ago when Jesus talked about foxes having holes but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. How he challenged people to stop making excuses why they were putting off making a commitment to follow him.

He calls us to complete commitment, where we are and who we are, but also for us to acknowledge that there will be a cost to being a follower.

Jesus calls us to hold lightly the world in which we live, that doesn't mean that it means nothing to us, it doesn't mean that we can abdicate our responsibilities, but it does mean that Jesus is calling us to "a commitment so absolute that all others are secondary, including those to our families and our own lives."^{1.2}

The Collect for today prays to the God of the ages who calls the Church to keep watch in the world and to discern the signs of the times...."^{1.3}

So, we are called to discern the signs of the times and to reach out and take the love of God into the world and to those who do not have a relationship with him. That doesn't necessarily mean we need to head off overseas, stepping outside the door of our church into our own community maybe as far as we need to go.

Michaela Bruzzese, a free-lance writer living in Chile said; "...that our most important work is to magnify the presence of God wherever and whenever possible in the world. Surely no one of us is up to the task, even though we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14) by a generous and loving God. But we are assured that we need only to care for the world as God does in order to be true disciples. With persistent prayer (Luke 18:6-7) and a steadfast faith (2 Timothy 3:14), we will love the prisoner, welcome the stranger (Hebrews 13:1-3), give to others abundantly, and rejoice when they cannot repay us (Luke 14:14). These everyday gestures to family, friends, co-workers, and strangers will reveal to all that we worship the one true God.

We are reminded that the commitment to the gospel is an absolute one; only those free from possessions can accept it (Luke 14:33). The best way to resist the pull of possessions is by sharing all that we have and doing so with joy; in the words of Mother Teresa, 'It is not how much you give, but with how much love you give it.' Our ability to give, and to do so with joy and love, will sufficiently betray our allegiance, not to any worldly leader or thing, but to the Holy One who has called us into being." ^{1.4}

So, it is okay to love your family, the world in which we live, the things we have and do ... but hold this love lightly, don't let it possess you to the point that God is squeezed out.

As Moses exhorts us – walk in God's ways. Turn your life around and be the shining example that a runaway slave became.

Know, acknowledge, bask in the profound love of God, which the psalmist talks about – let the God's love enfold you.

And know, whatever you are going through, wherever you are, whatever you do, whoever you are ... the Lord is with you. Amen.

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September 8, 2019.

REFERENCES

1. Loosely based on sermon P14C01 which contained quotes from:
 - 1.1. Sermon posted by Art Hebbeler on line via gospeltalk September 2001.
 - 1.2. Michaela Bruzzese; "You are what you worship", Sept 9 "Law of Love", Sojourners Magazine, September - October 2001.
 - 1.3. Collect for this Sunday "A Prayer Book for Australia"
 - 1.4. Michaela Bruzzese; "You are what you worship", introduction, Sojourners Magazine, September - October 2001.
2. Andrew Prior as posted on *midrash* in his sermon 'Are you really hungry' Sept 6, 2019.