**Philemon 1-21; Luke 14: 25-33**

**May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself cannot be my disciple.’

‘For which of you intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?’

I find this challenging stuff – and it is right to be challenged – no one said the Christian faith was going to be easy. If it is worthwhile, and if it is a lifelong, growing process, then being stretched actually makes us fitter for the purpose to which God has called and is calling us.

One of the things I noticed even as an ordinand, and then latterly as an ordained person is that people expect you to have the answers to hard questions. Not so, of course; and I freely admit that I really struggled with the gospel reading this morning.

The first part of it is relatively straightforward – maybe. Jesus says – only a bit harshly - that those who choose to follow him have to be prepared to do it to the exclusion of everything else. I am not a scholar of Jewish culture from that or any time, but my understanding is that the Jews went in rather for hyperbole as a means of making a point. The point was made by saying something extreme in order to highlight something else. So the use of the word ‘hate’ was a way of bringing into focus its opposite: namely love.

 So really, what Jesus was doing here was not telling his followers to hate – which is deeply deeply contrary to everything we know of God - but rather to emphasize the meaning of love – and specifically love of Him. He is warning them that love of Him is going to require of them a great deal, and that following Him will not be easy. But ultimately it strikes me that this is also a comfort – love me and get your priorities straight by doing that – and then your love for all the other important stuff in your life will fall into its proper context.

Love, let us not forget, is not limited or restricted by God.

When we have one child, we wonder how on earth it might be possible to have a second child and love it the same…….yet we do love it just as intensely as we have the first…..and so on down the line – as Dan, our number four son, knows, fortunately, full well! We do not need to hate one in order to love another fully; but God is Love, and it is through God that love can be both given and received completely.

The second part of this gospel reading – the bit about towers and going to war - is the bit that I struggled with – so much so that I came very close to simply opening it up to the floor and asking for ideas. My prior experience of how Jesus works would probably suggest that this was going to be by way of an illustration of his point. That was often the case when he told parables: he would make a statement, tell people how they were to be, and then tell a story to help them understand what he meant.

It was only when I had read and reread the passage and still couldn’t make any sense of it that I thought to read it aloud to Chris, to see if maybe he could shed any light on it for me. And the very act of reading the passage aloud made me hear it in a fresh way.

Any decent commentator would of course, at this point, simply remind me that, because of the way the biblical canon was put together, there is always the possibility that two parts of a lectionary reading are not as closely-linked as all that. They could simply be like beads on a thread, slotted onto the string and happening to come up against each other. But these ones seem to be together for a purpose – even if my main logic is that the Lectionary compilers have kept them together as one reading, and set it for this particular day every time Year C comes around.

The fact that I continued to struggle with it hinted something was going on other than happenstance – I suppose I should have thought outside the box in the first place – we know that Christ is so often a Christ of surprises; a Christ who is both counter cultural and counter intuitive. Jesus constantly challenges us to see the world differently.

So what we have here perhaps is this: first Jesus tells the crowds what they need to do in order to follow him, and then just when we expect him to elaborate on the teaching, he does something different: this time he seems to be going in quite hard – to convince the people of the seriousness of his charge that they should get themselves and their priorities straight if they are to follow him, and put their money where their mouths are, as it were.

But maybe what he is doing at this point is highlighting how foolish we look to others if we start something we can’t finish – how much we lose face; how much we run the risk of ridicule from our peers if we set off to do something under our own steam for our own self-aggrandisement, as it were.

We can make all the calculations we like in order to ensure that we don’t fail – and that’s what we all do – all the time; but actually, what Jesus might be saying is that making our careful calculations and taking steps to ensure that we will not fail are all completely pointless – if we want to be his disciples, we actually have to give up control to God – never mind if we risk looking stupid to other humans – the only way we will actually win is by risking losing everything – face, tower, money, war, whatever.

I think the other point I really want to make this morning is one that I touched on earlier – I almost wasn’t really joking when I suggested that I might open up my lack of understanding to the floor and ask all of you to help me grapple with what the gospel is all about. (In fact, sharing my battle with it with Chris was what finally made the penny drop: I asked a fellow Christian for help and support in understanding something about the nature of God). And that very point is embedded in what Jesus is saying – that we are all in the same boat – we ALL have brothers and sisters and family members and people we love and who love us, and that gift of love comes directly from God. And it is that love which binds us into a community, whose task it is to help and support each other – because we are far stronger together than we are separately.

And, just for the sake of completeness: when we look to the first reading – Paul’s letter to Philemon – we actually see that very thing: we see that Paul is writing not only to Philemon, but to Apphia, to Archippus and to all the people of the church in that place. He says to them: I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. … By that, he is acknowledging that their love for one another and for Jesus binds them and makes them more effective as disciples, but then he goes on: Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. … So even Paul, the great Paul – who irritates me while at the same time inspiring awe in me – is saying that he gains strength and refreshment from other church members at the same time as giving that strength and refreshment to them.

Maybe this week we can each seek to acknowledge that, what we achieve in love, we achieve because we first love Christ, and that beyond that, we are stronger if we stand and work as a community of faith than if we try to get results under our own steam alone.

**Amen**