

**Counting the Cost – a sermon by Mungo Walls,
St Michael's Sandhurst 16th March 2025**

Readings: Jeremiah 22:1-9,13-17, Luke 14:25-34

If I asked what words and emotions you associate with Jesus's teachings, I expect most would talk of love, forgiveness, and hope. This is what makes our Gospel reading today so challenging, even unsettling. We don't think of Jesus speaking in such stark, visceral terms, telling us we must "hate" our parents and our loved ones. That word grabs our attention and may cause despair in how we could possibly live this out. So, how do we make sense of such a radical call from such a loving God.

The opening lines, where Jesus says we must "hate" our family and even our own lives, are jarring. But it's essential to understand that Jesus was a master of teaching often using hyperbole to make a point, such as in Matthew ch 5 when Jesus tells us to be as perfect as God. Clearly, we could never reach this level of perfection, but His use of hyperbole pushes us to keep striving to try to be better than we are now. Likewise here, the Greek word μισεῖ [misei] is translated as "hate" but in other places it is translated as "to love less" or "to prioritize below." So Jesus isn't calling us to despise our family but prioritise God above them and above all things. This echoes the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." It's a call to reorder our lives so that God's love shapes and informs every relationship and decision. But even this interpretation is a huge demand. To truly place God first in everything we do is incredibly

disruptive to our modern way of living but considering our old testament reading today can we afford not to?

In Jeremiah chapter 22, we heard the Lord chastising the King of Judah. He lays out the dire penalty of defying God's commands, the destruction of all the King holds dear and the scorn of the surrounding, predominantly gentile, nations. God reminds the king how he should be acting and how he should be defending the poor rather than enriching himself with worldly possessions. It is clear that God wants the king to govern justly, to stop abusing the poor and to recognise that to be king requires him to be humble enough to put his people above his own desires.

In a similar vein, Jesus calls us to "carry our cross" and follow Him. This imagery would have been profoundly humbling to His audience. To us, the cross is a sign we are happy, even proud, to be associated with. After all, it is only through the crucifixion of Jesus on a cross that we have hope in salvation. But to people of Jesus's time, the cross was a symbol of suffering, shame and oppression; it was the method used by the occupying Romans to execute criminals. Those criminals who dragged their crosses through the streets of Jerusalem bore the scorn of all who saw them, and so it would require a willingness to lay aside pride and self-interest and be truly humble even to take up a cross metaphorically.

To emphasise this, Jesus gives us two parables, which both involve a humbling acknowledgement of reality. The builder counting the cost and the king assessing his army. The builder needs to do some careful planning or be mocked by

those who see his half completed works lying abandoned. While the king needs to recognize his limitations in the face of a stronger foe and sue for peace or face the total destruction of his army and the loss of his kingdom. Likewise, we are called to a realistic, humble commitment to God, and the acknowledgement that discipleship requires all we have.

Jesus' words challenge us to consider what it means to give our whole selves to God. This isn't about a one-time decision but a daily practice. It's easy to fall into a routine of faith—attending church on Sunday, saying grace before meals—without letting these practices transform our lives. True discipleship calls for a deeper commitment. It means aligning our actions, our thoughts, and our desires with God's will, especially when it's inconvenient or costly. It's about living out our vocation every day, not just when it's easy or expected.

Jesus ends with a striking statement: "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" Salt, in Jesus' time, was highly valued. It preserved food, added flavour, and even served as a form of payment—our word "salary" comes from the Latin word for salt.

In this sense, He is reminding us that when we have an excess of wealth and possessions, money loses its meaning. But on a deeper level, it warns against letting our faith become routine and perfunctory, losing its "flavour" in our lives.

It is so easy to do and I know I am guilty of this. Last year I began praying the daily offices: morning and evening prayer.

I made time to sit, read, and reflect. That hour was entirely devoted to God. But over time, I started to multitask—listening to it on the Church of England’s Daily Prayer app while making breakfast or walking the dog. Eventually, I realized I couldn’t even remember what I had listened to. My practice had become automatic, and I had lost the intentionality that made it meaningful. This is the danger Jesus warns against. Faith isn’t meant to be a box we check off; it’s a relationship that requires constant attention and renewal.

As we reflect on this passage, I invite you to consider: What does it mean for you to live out your faith in your daily life? How do you ensure that your relationship with God remains vibrant and central?

Maybe it’s setting aside time for prayer or scripture reading without distractions. Maybe it’s looking for ways to serve others, even in small, everyday acts of kindness. Perhaps it’s taking time to reflect on how God is calling you to grow and change.

Whatever it looks like, discipleship requires intentionality and commitment, as we read in the letter of James “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds”. It’s not about perfection but about showing up every day with a willing heart, ready to put God first so that we can follow where he leads us.