

The cost of discipleship by Rev Jane Kraft

Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves take up their cross and follow me”

Not a particularly attractive invitation.

When Jesus originally gathered his disciples his call to them was to “follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”. This was an invitation to journey with Jesus and join with him in the mission to draw others to follow him too.

The disciples are called to look beyond them selves to the wider community and to go out in the name of Christ to encounter the world.

But when Jesus told his disciples “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” they really had no conception of what answering this call would require of them. When we say we are Christians we indicate that we too are followers of Christ, that is what being a Christian means. But are we like the first disciples still as yet unaware of what true discipleship really means?

Jesus mission involved more than healing various ills and telling people to give up their possessions. Jesus mission was to redeem the world. He came to reconcile all people to the Father, to make them one with Him, as He is one with Him.

And here is where the crunch comes. There is a very clear difference between acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, recognising him as the Son of God and in following him as his disciple.

Jesus makes the distinction very plain. The implications of following are laid bare and the cost is spelt out. It involves an understanding of what is truly required of us and this may entail a different response than we had at first envisaged. If we are going to be disciples of Jesus then we must be willing to go all the way, there are no half measures no coping out when the going gets a bit tough. Following Jesus means self-denial taking up our cross and going wherever He leads.

Like the first disciples many of us have already set out on the path. We have said yes to the call to follow and are learning from our Lord the things he has to teach us, but are we like the disciples overlooking or even deliberately ignoring the way that true discipleship will lead?

When I was doing my training for ordination one of the first things we were encouraged to understand was the importance of knowing oneself.

We were urged to make an honest self-examination so we came to know ourselves as we really are not as we would like others to see us. We needed to discover those things in our lives, which might hinder our complete commitment to Christ.

But to respond to Jesus call to deny ourselves take up our cross and follow him requires not just the clergy or potential clergy to do this but everyone who confesses Christ as Lord.

It is then, with this knowledge that we embark on the first costly part of following Jesus call to deny ourselves.

We are used to thinking about giving up things in Lent, but when Jesus calls His followers to deny themselves it is not about giving up chocolate or our evening glass of wine for six weeks.

What Jesus is talking about is not denying things to our selves but giving up our self-centredness into the direction and control of God.

It involves not being constrained by our own desires and wills, it means ceasing to make self, the object of our life and actions and be liberated to follow Christ wherever He leads.

The second costly part of following, Jesus said, is taking up our cross.

In the first century the condemned criminal carried his own cross bar beam to the site of execution. It was heavy and painful to carry. Jesus if you remember fell under the weight of it and they had to get a passer by to assist him. It would have been a sight that the people in first century Palestine would have been familiar with.

Jesus makes it very plain that choosing to follow Him does not mean that everything will be rosy in the garden from now on. It doesn't imply that we will not have any problems or dark times.

There is a danger of setting out to follow Jesus and failing to perceive that this is not the easy option.

Taking up our cross is an active step in the way of suffering and endurance.

It means we are willing to suffer and even to give up what is most precious to us, life itself, for Jesus sake. The true nature of discipleship means being prepared to

go the way of Jesus and wherever that way leads what ever hardship and pain that involves it is a journey we do not take alone for He leads us each step of the way.

True discipleship can only be understood if it is recognised to be hand in hand with Jesus death. It is in following in the way that he went that we come to understand and know the nature of God and the good news of the kingdom. It is in understanding why Jesus took our humanity and died that we understand why we must follow.

Jesus explained it quite simply to Nicodemus “God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son that who ever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”

The nature of God is love, and the heart of the gospel is that because of that love God’s Son humbled himself and became like us to bring us back into a right relationship with him.

This mornings passage from Romans is a guide on “God-like love” you might like to spend a few moments re-reading later, for our reason for following and not counting the cost is encapsulated in one four-letter word LOVE.