

Sermon for 8am on 12th June 2016 – Luke 9:51-end – “Costly Following”

The other day I picked up a large wooden cross from Wakefield and took it on the train with me back to Ilkley. It has been hand-carved, inspired by the stone Saxon crosses at the back, and it will be used as a wall-cross for Church House. I think it's really rather good.

But it turns out that taking up your cross while dressed in black clerical costume creates quite a stir amongst the general public, and sitting on a train with a large wooden cross propped up beside you is a fairly uncommon sight!

We are all familiar with the phrase “taking up your cross”. It's one of those phrases that has made it from bible to popular usage, and perhaps we tend to lose sight a little of what it means therefore. So in our reading from Luke this morning we have Jesus' reminder of the costliness and the radicalness of being his disciple. It turns out it isn't something we can play at or do as a part-time hobby, but instead, it's a real choice with massive implications for our lives now and in the future.

In this episode, three people are challenged about following Jesus. Two volunteer and one is called. The first one promises to follow wherever Jesus goes; to which Jesus replies that he has nowhere to go and must rely on the generosity and hospitality of others at all times – a precarious existence at best. The second is called to follow, but wishes to bury his father. Whether his father is dead or not is not the point. Following Jesus means putting him above all other relationships. The third person volunteers to follow Jesus, but must say goodbye first. Jesus responds about how if you plough you must keep your eyes forward, not back.

This all feels strange, awkward and perhaps a little cruel from Jesus upon first reading. What's the harm in saying goodbye or carrying out the culturally expected death responsibilities that come with the death of a parent? Why does discipleship have to be hard?

Jesus is saying these things whilst on his way to Jerusalem to die. He has only a short time to live and so, for him, there is no room for time-wasters. His disciples are committed to him above all else. Here, Jesus isn't meek and mild, he simply lays it out as it is. If you want to join me, you must jump in with both feet – I have no time for half-and-halfers. Jesus says that as his followers, life will be uncertain. There will be challenge which goes beyond feelings of security – ‘I have nowhere to lay my head and in fact I'm going to Jerusalem to die’. Jesus says that his followers are radicals like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who were instructed not to deal with the funeral arrangements of Israel. It isn't that Jesus is saying that burials are unimportant, he's simply saying that his disciples must prioritise following him because time is short. Jesus' expectation isn't that we despise the good and healthy relationships that we have, but that in fact his followers must be more radical than even Elijah, the prophet, who let Elisha say goodbye to his parents. The Greek grammar in the ploughing reference is about “looking to the things left behind” as an ongoing action rather than glancing. What kind of ploughman doesn't look forward because he is so busy looking back? The other day, we were digging out small drill holes for cabbage seeds in our garden and Samuel, my 5-year-old, kept getting distracted and so he kept letting neat lines go wobbly and squint. It's the same principal at work here.

If you are like me, you are still wondering what this has to do with my life today. Well, here are my ideas... People talk generally about faith as a support or a crutch; which it is from one angle. But it is also a calling to a radically different life. It isn't just a hobby, or a thing we do on Sundays but

instead it's a choice to follow where Jesus goes. And that might mean we have less security, however we understand that; but it certainly doesn't involve it being boring!

Faith is not a choice like many of our other choices. We can't make the choice and then keep wondering how life might have been if we'd done otherwise. We choose to follow and keep our eyes on Jesus; not counting the cost, not tallying up our sacrifices, not thinking of where we could have lived, what we could have done with our lives, and how much we could have earned – what use is a ploughman who keeps looking backwards. Instead we put Jesus first in all our choices, even when those choices affect our families.

Following Jesus isn't about just following the cultural norms and being good citizens and then attending church as a bonus extra. Instead, as his radical disciples, we are going to find ourselves in positions where maybe following him might put us at odds with our culture, might have us seen as strange; but that is the calling we have received.

And so, we follow Jesus as radicals, as revolutionaries, and as faithful disciples. We follow into uncertainty, we follow when it involves cultural differences, and we follow when it challenges our relationships. We follow, not so that we can cause or seek trouble, but because we are totally sold-out 100% committed to following; because time is short. All of us only have a short time to follow Jesus. Let's not waste it. Let's take up our crosses, be counted as what we are, and love God and each other for all we can be. Amen.