

“Leaving The Family Home”

(Luke 14.25-33)

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Jesus And Family

*“Now large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them,
‘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.’”*

His words shock and affront us. They’re offensive – *hate our families* – why on earth would he say that? Surely that can’t be right? (It’s one of those mornings I hasten to remind you that I neither write nor select these texts! Don’t shoot me – I’m only the piano player!)

Family in the ancient world was an even bigger matter than now. Family provided you with your total identity – it told you and others who you were and where you fitted in society. (*You are Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter in Nazareth.*) And it was your security – family was what kept you safe economically and socially. To be expelled from family or to lose your family was like a death sentence... you were reduced to the margins and were no longer recognised as a full person. (*Remember all the gospel stories featuring widowed women and how vulnerable they are.*)

Jesus stepped outside *his* family to follow the call of God... refusing even to recognise Mary as his mother. Nazareth said he was mad and would no longer have anything to do with him – he’d left his identity and they would no longer recognise him. He stepped away from family security into that precarious life on the road – *“foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.”* (Matt. 8.20) And in today’s gospel he turns on those flocking to him as his popularity soars... people coming along for the ride... and savages them... *‘This isn’t a joy ride. If you’re serious about following me, then you do have to follow... you have to step-away from everything too. Stop and think about it – are you willing to pay that price? If not, you’d be better to get out now.’*

At which point we feel mighty uncomfortable... Is he saying that to us too? It’s so challenging we normally close our ears and pretend it didn’t happen... But let’s be brave this

morning and explore a little... Once again it helps if we look at these words in the Eugene Peterson translation...

*“Anyone who comes to me but refuses **to let go of** father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple. Anyone who won’t shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can’t be my disciple.”*

Leaving the Family Home

With my mother now shifted permanently to residential care, we’ve quickly cleared the family home for sale. On several occasions recently I’ve sat in the empty shell of my old home where I lived for 20 years... alone with the memories of my childhood. They are mixed... some happy... some painful and sad. At 60 I’m more aware than ever before of the legacy of those years growing-up in that family. I’m aware of what that experience taught me about the nature of reality (how the world is)... and all the behaviours and strategies I learned to keep me safe and happy in such a world. I notice that it’s unexpectedly similar to the family legacy of the ancient world...

It did form my identity... It was there that I decided ‘who’ I was and how I fitted into society... the sort of man I would be, how I would try to conduct myself. All my hopes, dreams and aspirations were formed in the mixing-bowl of that family home.

And it was that childhood experience that taught me what I needed to do to be safe and secure, in a world full of danger, pain and anxiety. Most of the behaviours I live with today – some of which are really unhelpful – I learned back there.

I found the experience of sitting in the empty family home unexpectedly emotional... disturbing...

I’m ready for that house to be sold now. I don’t want to go back there anymore. I’m ready for that world to be consigned to the past – it’s my *old* life and I don’t want to live there anymore. And the house is a symbol of a much deeper and more powerful separation... a more radical letting-go.

I am no longer willing to see reality/the world as my childhood taught me. I want to shed that old identity – to intentionally dis-identify my true adult ‘soul’ from the boy I once was. If Jesus is asking me to leave that old family-self behind, then I’m ready! And with the dumping of that old reality, goes all those behaviours designed to keep me safe. They go on the rubbish skip too... along with all the other junk... stuff that once served a purpose, but is no longer needed or useful now.

The voice of Christ says... *‘Reality **isn’t** like you were taught in that family home, and the security it promised you is illusory. You are not that child! Dump all that old stuff and follow me into a new world of blessing, gift and life abundant.’* And my decision is clear - from here on, to the best of my ability, it is Christ’s voice I’ll follow... his reality... his way of walking.

“Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of family—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple.”

I think my story is a limited but reasonable doorway into understanding this gospel, but there are a couple of matters to address.

Hate

We could easily be distracted by the word ‘*hate*’.¹ Don’t read it literally – it’s a common Semitic idiom of the time expressing ‘preference’... in much the same way we say ‘*I love potato but I hate pumpkin.*’ Eugene Peterson’s translation ‘*to let go of*’ in terms of ‘*no longer holding onto*’ is a good way to understand Christ’s words. He’s *not* calling for alienation from our families. Indeed in my current example, letting go of the childhood legacy, is allowing me to be closer to my mother and sisters than ever before.

Crucifixion and Cost

And once again Christ uses this ugly metaphor of crucifixion... *“Anyone who won’t shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can’t be my disciple.”* This ‘*letting go*’ is tortuously painful... we experience it as a death. It’s not to be taken lightly...

¹ As it reads in the NRSV text.

There's a dimension to this I only now understand... To shed the old life is to shed the protective shell we've built around us to keep out pain. To step out of the old identity is to become naked... vulnerable... open and undefended. It is to join Christ, stripped naked on his journey through death to resurrection.

So I understand Christ's counsel. Following his way is a decision that should never be taken lightly. We need to weigh it up... the risk, the cost, the benefit... Christ's way is not easy, and you'd only walk it *if* you decide it's worth it.

Choose Life

Without care today's gospel (and this sermon) *could* be heard as life-denying... but we're supposed to remember that following Christ leads to abundant life. And so to remind us, the lectionary gives us a slab from *Deuteronomy* (30.15-20) as an accompaniment... Moses gathers the people before they enter the Promised Land and confronts them with a critical choice...

'Today I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse.

*I beg you... **choose Life**... so that you and your children shall live..*

really live... live exuberantly.'

Christ says, *'weigh up the cost...'* for we'll only walk his way if we really want the life he promises...

Are we ready...

- To leave the old identity formed in our childhood to be made a new creation in Christ?
- To swap that old familial version of reality for the radically different perception of Christ?
- To shed that old protective shell and step naked from crucifixion and tomb into resurrection life... trusting that Christ has walked this way before us, and will never abandon us.

“Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of family—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple.”