

The Cost of Discipleship

13th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 4 September 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-25; Luke 14: 25-35

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Who could argue with today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy? It's everything that most people believe religion to be about: choose to follow God's rules and live, choose not to and suffer the consequences; be true to the covenant, or else. This is what many parents still want for their children—some religious values, so-called—so they'll send them to a church school (though our schools are expected not to overdo the more explicitly religious stuff, like belief and worship).

Indeed, this sort of Deuteronomy religion has always been a staple of child rearing. God-fearing parents would take their children to see public hangings, as recently as the nineteenth century, to warn them off a life of crime. And it survives in a popular jingle like 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town':

He's making a list
He's checking it twice
He's gonna find out
Who's naughty or nice ...

He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake.

God is imagined like this rather creepy Santa Claus, spying on the kiddies and quick to punish any lapses from conventional morality.

And of course, many God-fearing types are still quick to punish. Nice straight people: good; same sex couples: bad. Decent hardworking businesspeople can keep millions in JobKeeper, even if they didn't actually need it; while for those undeserving welfare recipients, it's Robodebt—and good riddance. It's all about keeping on the right side of the ledger. So, people insist on their elevated moral status—'I'm a good person', people tell us priests, explaining why they don't need to go to church. Many people maintain this mentality of 'me, good; you, bad' even if they're utter scoundrels, refusing to acknowledge any failings whatsoever while stubbornly insisting on their own righteousness, with Trump and Putin as today's worst-case examples.

This sort of Deuteronomy religion is a major voice in the Old Testament—with its long chronicles of Jewish Kings who made good choices, interspersed with those who made bad choices and paid the price. Even the story of Adam and Eve was scripted accordingly, who were expelled from paradise for their bad choices.

But then, friends, the wheels all too easily come off. Bad things happen to good people, after all, and how do we respond? Many people lose their faith, such as it is, when life doesn't deliver what they think they deserve. How can there be a God when good people get cancer? But, lo and behold, the Old Testament challenges this Deuteronomy religion in its own pages, with the figure of Job. He was a good and Godly man, yet he lost everything—family, health,

friends, possessions. The Old Testament itself is telling us that it's not as simple as Deuteronomy pictures it.

Which brings us to Jesus in today's Gospel, who echoes the theme of choosing God's will from Deuteronomy, but who draws entirely different conclusions. Choosing to follow Jesus can lead not to an obvious reward but to the loss of family, of possessions, of life itself. In a traditional honour and shame society, as in Jesus' day and still found in many places, the cost of following Jesus could be substantial. Like the Palestinian student I once had, who was training to be a priest for the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. He was raised a Muslim but, when he became a Christian and was baptised, his angry father disowned him. He lost his family, his inheritance, and in earlier times he might have lost his life. Just as Jesus pictures it in today's Gospel. Following Jesus proved to be a costly and wrenching choice for this young Palestinian—not the sort of outcome that Deuteronomy religion imagines; not the sort of thing that people who cling to Deuteronomy religion today can readily understand.

But then they don't really understand the Christianity they profess. And, like the examples of a not-too-bright builder and a reckless military adventurer that Jesus gives us as a warning in today's Gospel, they prove useless to Jesus and to his cause. Because they can't understand let alone face the scandal that Jesus' own faithfulness to God cost him everything, as flagged in today's Gospel: separated from his family and sent to the cross, with his few possessions divided among the soldiers who crucified him. He was faithful to God, yet he ended up being expelled from the Holy city.

So, what about us? For us, it's not as if being cut off, threatened and dispossessed is the point of it all. The goal isn't renunciation for the sake of it. Instead, it's simply about following Jesus wherever he leads. And there are examples ready to hand, in situations that ordinary Christians like us might find ourselves facing.

Many Christians in our post-truth world end up on the wrong side of cranks and conspiracy theorists in their own families, which can lead to splits and separations. Keeping everything nice by biting our lip and saying nothing isn't necessarily 'the Christian thing to do'—sometimes we have to call out stupid vicious nonsense and let the chips fall where they may. Other Christians suffer significant losses for doing the right but unpopular thing, as Republican Congresswoman Liz Cheney discovered, losing her congressional endorsement for standing up to MAGA lunacy in her own party.

What might be required of us who've chosen to follow Christ? Our baptism has set us on this path after all, with its symbolic removal from our parents as we're handed over to the priest, with the symbolic removal of our usual clothing, and then the symbolic drowning of baptism, to gain the shining garment of Christ's own righteousness, then to grow up and face the consequences of being that sort of person in this sort of world.

One consequence of this symbolic separation from the empty display and false values of the world is that we become integral members of Christ's body here in the Christian Church, where our potential losses have to be measured against significant gains. Look at Onesimus the runaway slave in today's epistle reading from St Paul, addressed to Paul's fellow Christian Philemon, the owner of Onesimus. As a slave Onesimus was nothing, and now as a runaway he's less than nothing, an outlaw who could be killed for his desertion. Yet here we see Paul using every trick in the book, including outright manipulation, to persuade Philemon that he has to go easy on Onesimus—that it's his Christian duty to welcome him back no longer just as a slave but now as a fellow Christian convert at Paul's hands. Here we see the kind of remarkable social transformation that being the Church meant in those early days.

The reassurance for us in the Letter to Philemon is that if following Christ might bring serious loss of security and status, it also gives us new friends, new protection, new accountability, and new belonging in the Church, as Paul demonstrated. How extraordinary to see a whole New Testament book devoted to securing the welfare of just one endangered person, because he was a fellow Christian.

And one last thing. If it's safe and comfortable being a Christian in middle class Australia today, what about the entirely foreseeable challenges likely to face our world in the decades ahead? What about a seriously worsening climate crisis, with waves of climate refugees, with more and worse pandemics, and with genuine risk of nuclear war thrown in for good measure. Might following Christ suddenly become a deadly serious business, involving much more demanding choices, in a world crying out for people with courage and compassion. And if so, will we be ready?

The Lord be with you ...