

# **“The meaning of Commitment”**

**Sermon given by Revd. David Warnes at St Cuthbert’s  
on 4th September 2016**

**In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining. Amen**

A few weeks ago Anjem Choudary was found guilty under Section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000 – his crime: inviting support for so-called Islamic State. In the popular press he has been widely condemned as a preacher of hate, as someone seeking to foster division, as someone who takes the binary view that other people are either part of the solution – sharing his fundamentalist beliefs – or part of the problem.

All of which helps to make today’s Gospel very challenging and uncomfortable, for Jesus appears to be saying that following him involves hatred

**“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.**

Which makes one think that the Daily Mail might, on the evidence of today’s Gospel, have called Jesus a preacher of hate. So was Jesus a preacher of hate? The short answer, you’ll be relieved to hear, is no. To arrive at that short answer, this Gospel needs careful unpacking.

Notice first that Jesus has attracted a huge following. “Large crowds were traveling with him”. The original Greek of the Gospel is even more emphatic – a literal translation would be “many crowds”. So Jesus is trying to get them to grasp the distinction between being a follower - a hanger-on, a novelty-seeker, a sensation-seeker – and being a disciple.

And then we encounter that difficult word hate. Many commentators have suggested that this is hyperbolic language – exaggeration for effect – and Jesus made a lot of use of hyperbolic language. It may be more helpful to look at some of the other places in Luke’s Gospel where the word “hate” is used. Sometimes it does clearly mean hatred in the sense of enmity – for example that phrase in the *Benedictus*, the Song of Zechariah:

**“...that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”**

And then, in the Beatitudes, Jesus says:

**“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”**

Elsewhere in the Gospel, hate has a different meaning. Remember Jesus’ teaching on the subject of wealth:

[Luke 16:13] <sup>3</sup> **No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”**

In that saying, Jesus is not talking about hatred as an *emotion*, he is talking about choice, the choice between devoting your life to God and devoting your life to making money. When he

talks about hating money he does not mean *detesting* money, he means choosing something else other than money, having little or no regard for money.

So in today's Gospel Jesus is not encouraging people to hate their closest relatives, he is pointing out in a very emphatic way that discipleship involves choosing, and may involve very difficult choices. Those choices are not just about our emotional lives. When we think about our families we think primarily in terms of emotion – the people whom we love, the people to whom we are bound by ties of kinship but who we find difficult and challenging. The crowds who heard Jesus say the words that we are reflecting on this morning thought about family in other ways. For them, the family was an authority structure in which gender and age determined where each member stood in the pecking order, with children at the bottom of the heap, wives subject to the authority of husbands and daughters subject to the authority of fathers. The family was a network of honour and influence, and the behaviour of individual family members could either bring dishonor on the whole family or increase its status in the community. And the family was an economic unit, a context in which those too young, too old or too ill to be productive would nevertheless be fed. That is, I think, the reason why Jesus couples hard teaching about the cost of discipleship in terms of family relations with the equally hard teaching which ends today's Gospel:

**“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”**

In those days to give up your family was, in a very real sense, also to give up your economic security.

And discipleship can also mean giving up your physical security, and perhaps also your life, for today's Gospel includes a third hard saying:

**“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”**

That's not necessarily about martyrdom – few Christians are called to that, though some are in our own time. Nor is it about putting up with aches, pains and physical limitations, though I remember my grandmother regarding her sciatica as the cross she was called upon to carry. I sympathized, for I know from personal experience that it is extremely painful, but discipleship isn't about putting up with adversity cheerfully, it's about the struggle to give up self-interest and live lovingly.

So today's Gospel, including those parables about the landowner planning to build a tower and the king calculating the chances of victory in battle, is a reminder that discipleship is demanding, but is in no sense the preaching of hate.

The compilers of our lectionary understood this, and that is why they coupled this difficult Gospel with today's Epistle, which is a great illustration of the way discipleship is supposed to work. Paul is writing to Philemon, a Christian prosperous enough to have slaves in his household. The letter concerns Onesimus, a slave who has broken the law by running away from the household of Philemon. Paul is taking the risk of sending Onesimus back, so he is not directly challenging the institution of slavery, rather he is appealing to Philemon to respond to

Onesimus not with the punishment that Roman Law laid down for runaway slaves, but with love. Paul knows that, at the heart of the Christian Gospel, is the understanding that only love can elicit and foster love, so he doesn't order Philemon to forgive Onesimus:

**“For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love...”**

And Paul is urging Philemon to go *beyond* forgiveness, for he writes about the possibility of a transformation of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, a transformation in which the old relationship between master and slave will be replaced by a new relationship of loving brotherhood in Christ. That transformation may lead to Onesimus being freed from slavery and allowed to return to Paul and work with him, but Paul only hints at that.

It's a big ask, because discipleship is a big ask, and we do not know how Philemon responded. Paul's radicalism is gentle, but it is none the less radical for that. He is asking Philemon to give up his authority as head of the household and his legal rights as the owner of Onesimus – to move away from the security of the accepted way of running society and to embrace the good news of forgiveness, reconciliation and fellowship which Jesus lived out and proclaimed. Paul is asking of Philemon – and Jesus in today's Gospel is asking of those who would be his disciples – nothing less than a wholesale change in the way that they think and act, a broadening of their love and commitment from the secure network of the family so that it embraces humanity in all its diversity, awkwardness and superficial unlovability. Not the preaching of hate but a radical rejection of the kind of binary, “us and them” thinking that preachers of hate and those who indulge in prejudice of all kinds indulge in. Not the preaching of hate, but the practical living out of love.

Amen.