**Luke 9:51-62**

**The cost of discipleship**

You wouldn’t have put Jesus in charge of marketing and recruitment if you had been running a Palestinian company 2000 years ago, would you? What sort of approach to marketing is this?

Here we have the story of three men, three potential recruits for the Jesus movement, and two of them are put off by Jesus, and the third is summoned by him but with criteria that he clearly wasn’t willing to follow.

It’s not really a strategy for growth, is it?

If Jesus had been trained in marketing or business recruitment, I’m sure that he would have taken a different approach. If Jesus had been trained in the world of business and wanted to recruit the best people, he would have sold his religious movement in a much more positive way.

Surely Jesus would have done better to tell them all the wonderful benefits of following him rather than painting a picture of how tough it would be…

Surely Jesus could have focused on the adventure of discipleship, the opportunities that awaited the disciples to change the world and a make a positive difference that would last for centuries. Perhaps Jesus could have focused on the opportunity to perform miracles in his name, the opportunities to travel and the amazing networking opportunities that would be available for personal development.

But no – Jesus fails to take that approach at all. Instead, he paints a picture of discipleship that is about tough choices; discipleship as self-denial, the steep and rugged pathway, the way to death, not life.

But then the criteria for the Kingdom of God is not the same criteria we are looking for when we want to build an organisation: perhaps even a church.

Perhaps we make it too easy for people and don’t spend nearly enough time talking about the difficulties of following Christ. If we were brave enough to do that, we might have smaller churches but perhaps they would be filled with more dedicated disciples. I remember hearing a story by the great evangelist Tony Campolo in the US and his friend had taken over a church of 300 people. A couple of years later, Campolo saw him and asked how the church was going. His friend was enthusiastic: “It’s going great! I’ve managed to preach it down to a membership of 20!”

It might seem a strange approach - but as Pastor, he would rather have 20 dedicated disciples of Jesus than 300 people, of whom 280 were only attending because it was their hobby or social life.

That is the criteria of the Kingdom of God: it’s about depth of discipleship, not just numbers of followers. That seems to be the message of this passage anyway…

And first reading suggests that Jesus was trying to discourage these men following him but I’m not sure that’s the whole story. I think he wanted them to follow him – but not at any cost; it was crucial that they count the cost and take discipleship seriously. Better not to follow Jesus at all than to be a lukewarm disciple…

So what principles do we learn from these three interactions about the cost of truly following Jesus?

First, we learn that, in following Jesus, we have no earthly security.

“I will follow you wherever you go!”, says the first man. That’s quite some statement to make, isn’t it? The man had no idea where Jesus was going or what the future contained. He had no idea what the journey would be like. And yet he was quite prepared to say, “I will follow you wherever you go!”

Perhaps he thought that following Jesus would have an element of excitement and adventure about it. He might have heard about the healings and the raising of people from the dead. He might have been excited about the way in which Jesus was prepared to confront others in authority. He might have thought that here is a Rabbi with a difference and that it could only be amazing and adventurous to follow him.

But Jesus won’t allow for that sort of misunderstanding for one moment: “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head”.

There was a real irony about this. The Word had become flesh – he who had flung stars into space and yet the King of glory had nowhere that he could call home: he had no earthly security, he camped out on the sofa-bed in Peter’s house in Capernaum, he had to borrow a coin to tell a story, he had to borrow a donkey to ride into Jerusalem. He was even buried in a borrowed tomb.

Jesus had absolutely no earthly security and if we are to follow in his footsteps, we are to be willing to give up any claim to earthly security too. Of course, that’s not the same thing as saying that we have to give away all our possessions but only that we are not to put our security in these things. And it’s not the same thing as saying that we have no security: we do. But the security we enjoy is in our relationship with our Father God, not in our amassed wealth or homes or possessions.

There is a real challenge to us here to think through where our true security lies.

Of course, it is very easy to say that our security lies in our relationship with God. It’s easy to trot those words out without giving them much thought. But is it really true? Does the way in which we order our lives and live our lives truly reflect that?

This passage calls us to serious assessment of our priorities and where we truly find our security.

Then Jesus comes into contact with the next man and from this encounter we learn that we are to have no earthly ties, verse 59-60.

Now this comes across as a really shocking conversation, doesn’t it? The story says this: “To another, Jesus said, ‘Follow me’. But he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father’. But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead’.”

Jesus calls the man to follow him and receives what seems a quite reasonable response: he wants time to bury his father. But Jesus won’t allow even for that” “Let the dead bury their own dead”.

Now, this is quite a difficult part of Scripture to understand and there could be two possible interpretations that help us to understand it a bit more.

The first interpretation is that the man’s father had been dead for quite a long time. If the father had just died, the man would not have been out and about in the town but would have been performing mourning rituals instead and these lasted for quite a long time in the Jewish culture of the day. In Jewish ritual, a person was buried in a tomb immediately after their death but then, a year later, the bones would have been retrieved and reburied in a slot in the tomb wall. So it may be that the man was asking for a year’s delay before following Jesus. So it is possible that the father had died quite some time ago and the official time for mourning was over but the man Jesus was speaking to was in the ‘in-between time’ waiting for the first year to pass so that the bones could be reburied.

But there is another interpretation that is more likely. It is entirely feasible that the man’s father hadn’t yet died and he was saying to Jesus, “I have family responsibilities; I can’t leave my father in old age: when he has died and I am free from my responsibilities, then I will follow you”. The man may have been delaying discipleship because of his domestic circumstances.

We don’t know the specifics of the situation but we do understand what it is that Jesus is saying, and it is hard for us to hear: that the call of God on our lives must come before anything and everything else; bar none. If we have to choose between earthly responsibilities and Kingdom responsibilities, then God must always come first.

Now, we need to be absolutely sure we hear this correctly because God does not call us to be irresponsible and just throw aside all our earthly responsibilities in such a way that may cause pain and hurt to others. He is not saying that being a Christian means that we don’t pay due attention to our families and our domestic responsibilities. Of course he doesn’t – that wouldn’t be the loving thing to do and the Gospel, ultimately, is all about love.

But it was a very Rabbinic way of speaking to make things very black and white: that was how they taught in those days. Jesus often taught like a Rabbi in that sense by drawing comparisons between opposite ideas, for example: ‘if you want to live, you must die’ or ‘you are either for me or against me’ or ‘if you want to love God you must hate your brother and sister and father and mother’. He wasn’t saying these things as if they were literally true. But, as a good Rabbi, was drawing stark comparisons as a metaphor to show the importance and seriousness of discipleship.

So, in this passage he says leave the dead to bury the dead – follow me; the same sort of black and white saying of Jesus. He was drawing a comparison of priority in a Jewish, Rabbinic way…

Jesus is saying to this man that, in order to be a follower, we must sit more lightly to our earthly ties and be prepared to go wherever God wants us to and live lives of total obedience to his call.

Again, that is a hard thing to hear: we might think that we can do that and that we are prepared to always do that. But does the way we live our lives today truly evidence that? Does God come first in our lives in a really obvious, practical way in the choices we make?

And so we come to the final encounter in verses 61-62 and learn that we are to have no earthly distractions if we want to truly follow Jesus. The interaction is this: “Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me say farewell to those at my home’. Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God’.”

Again, this seems like a reasonable request from the man who wants to go and say goodbye to his family. But Jesus, again in good Rabbinic style, is bringing out the sharp difference between those who fix their eyes firmly on Jesus and those who want to look back, perhaps with an element of regret about what they are losing if they choose to live a life of discipleship. Contrast this man’s attitude with that of Peter, James and John, who just dropped their nets and followed Jesus.

If you want to follow Jesus – if you want to truly follow Jesus - there is no looking back. And that is why Jesus also told parables about counting the cost of discipleship before choosing to embark on that lifestyle. He would rather us not follow him at all than, at a later date, regret the decision we made and keep harking back to how things used to be. You know the parable Jesus told: “Which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’”.

If we want to follow Jesus, we must be true to our word. We must not be distracted by anything, we must not look back with regret. But we must give our lives wholeheartedly over to him

So this is a difficult passage for us to hear today. These are strong words, they are not comfortable reading. But ultimately, this is the truth of Christian discipleship: that is costs us everything, we have no earthly security, no earthly ties, no earthly distractions that could possibly compare with the glory of our calling to follow Jesus.

That is truly authentic Christianity. Count the cost, Leave it behind, Don’t look back.

That is what Jesus said to these three men and that is the call he makes on our lives this morning. That’s the cost of following him.

But of course, the cost of not following him is even greater…Jesus said, “I have come so that you may have life in all its fullness”. If we don’t follow Jesus, we will never know fullness of life and the cost of that is far more than the cost of obedience.

It’s a choice that each one of us has to make…