



A sermon preached at
St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Dr Tim Howles

Reading: Luke 14:25-33

In our Gospel reading today we come to (what is sometimes called) one of the “hard sayings” of Jesus: “if anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

And naturally, when we hear this, we may wonder what Jesus is saying. After all, does not the fifth commandment say: “honour your father and mother” (Deut 5:16)? Does not Jesus himself say: “this is my commandment: that you should love one another” (John 13:34)?

So what’s going on? Why is Jesus talking about “hate”?

I think we have to draw a distinction here between an “active” and “comparative” sense of the word “hate”.

Let me show you what I mean. In the book of Genesis we read that Jacob had two wives: Rachel and Leah. And in Gen 29:31 it says that Jacob “loved” one of them (Rachel) and “hated” the other (Leah). Does that mean Jacob “actively” hated Leah? No, it’s a *comparative* term, because in the next verse it says: “though he loved them both, his love for one was greater than his love for the other” (Gen 29:28-31). The verb has a comparative sense: *compared to* his love for Rachel, his love for Leah was *like* hate.

And that’s what Jesus is saying here too. “Examine yourselves”, he’s saying. “You love your parents, your spouse, your children. And it’s right that you do so. But your love for me must be so much above anything else, that it makes all your other loves look tame by comparison”.

How does that make you feel? Confused? Alarmed? Angry?

Let's think about it in more depth now under three headings.

1. What Jesus is calling for here is not optional

Look at how this passage begins. Verse 25: "large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said [...]".

Do you see the significance of this? Jesus is not saying these words to the disciples, his inner circle, but to *everyone* who was with him.

One of the things I often encounter as I go about is the idea that there are two levels of Christian discipleship:

- Most of us, after all, are busy: we have our careers, our families, our schedules. So we try to make it to church on Sunday and on special occasions, to pray if we have time, and that's about the best we can do.
- But that's OK, because there are others who will do all that: the *clergy*! And so it doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't matter how *intense* my faith is, because someone else has been set apart to do it for me.

But Jesus is saying: there aren't two levels; there's only one. Anyone who wants to follow me has to love me like this; what I am asking for is full, complete, sacrificial discipleship.

One of the things that really irks me when I'm on holiday are hotel bills. You look up the cost online and it says £70 for the room. Fine. But in morning, you go to settle up and it's £77 or £83. Because you haven't reckoned with the taxes, with the service-fees, with the £8 it cost to have that bottle of water from the mini-bar! All that's in the small print!

But Jesus doesn't do that. With him, there's no small print; he's entirely up-front. *You have to love me like this.*

Some of us might be saying inwardly: I don't really like that sort of language; it sounds too much; I don't want to go that far. But if you're a Christian, this is what Jesus himself is calling you to do. He's saying: *if you want to be my follower, I have to be the first and foremost in your life; everything must pale in comparison compared to your love for me.*

What Jesus is calling for here is not optional.

2. What Jesus is calling for here is not tame

Remember the context in which Jesus was speaking. This was a patriarchal, family-orientated society. Your life completely revolved around relationships with family and extended family, for business, for marriage, for socialising.

And so for Jesus to say that you should love me *more* than all these was to say something radical indeed. He's saying: "to be my follower is to leave behind everything you thought gave you meaning and identity in life, and to find those things in me instead".

When I became a Christian aged 18, I experienced an initial burst of excitement and enthusiasm. To be saved by Christ; to enter into relationship with the God who made me; to know His power and peace; to be assured of eternal life, no matter what the circumstances. It seemed to good to be true.

And then, over a few months, it dawned upon me that life would never be the same again. To become a Christian is to submit to Christ as Lord. And that means: leaving behind some of your old way of life. I realised following Jesus would have implications for how I lived; the way I spoke; the relationships I pursued; the decisions I made about money and career and sex. I realised that to follow Christ was not a passive, or a tame, or a conventional thing. It was to enter into the adventure of a lifetime.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the four siblings find their way into the land of Narnia through the magical wardrobe. And once there, they hear about this strange character called Aslan. And when Lucy (one of the sisters) realises that this Aslan is not a man, but a lion, she asks: "is he safe?"

And here's the answer she gets from Mr Beaver:

Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe.
But he's good. He's the king, I tell you.

To become a Christian is to enter into the adventure of a lifetime, because it is to put someone else in control of your life. Are you ready to do that? Or are you fitting God into your other agendas and patterns of life, playing around the edges? That's not the life Jesus envisions: "such a person cannot be my disciple", he says (Luke 14:26).

What Jesus is calling for here is not tame.

3. What Jesus is calling for here makes sense

At the heart of the Christian faith is the idea that, in Christ, God is calling you to be what you were created to be in the first place: living with Him as your Lord and King.

And that means that, as we begin to put God first in all things, suddenly, and to our surprise, we begin to find ourselves in synch with the heart of reality itself.

And that includes our relationships with other people.

Why do we have problems in our marriage? Why have we fallen out with that person at work? Why do we find that person *sat over there* so difficult, that we can't bear to be in the same room as them?

Because we are not living the way God intended. You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you are to love your neighbour as yourself. And it's only when we do the first that we will have the perspective and the power to do the second.

You see, Jesus' call to love him this way is radical. But it is not foolish to accept it. For to follow Him is to live life according to the maker's instructions. And so to put Him first is, strangely and perversely, to find that all your other relationships will find their proper place too.

As you know, C. S. Lewis married his wife, Joy, later in life, and they lived up the road at the Kilns. But Lewis was aware that he did not always love Joy as much as he should or as much as he wanted to. And he tried to understand why. And after pondering this for a while, here's what he wrote:

When I have learnt to love God better than the dearest person to me on earth, I know then I shall love that person even better than I do now: when first things are put first, other things are not suppressed but increase.

There are no half-steps in the Christian life. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to put him first in every aspect of your life. And Christians are never told that this will be easy or without pain. But, as we do that, we will find a peace and a purpose to life that surpasses anything else that the world can offer.

May it be so for us. **Amen.**

Sermon preached on Sunday 08 September 2019, the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity