

23rd Sunday Year C

Fr Barry Hammett

Luke 14:25-33

*"Whoever does not bear his own cross and
come after me, cannot be my disciple"*

(Luke 14, 27)

One of the things my late father most enjoyed doing was sitting and studying a map. He was one of those people - perhaps you are as well - who can look at an Ordnance Survey map and visualise the countryside on the basis of the contour lines. I have friends like that, who always seem to know how to get from a to b via lots of other interesting and attractive places having simply glanced at a road atlas. I marvel at their ability to do so, because I have spent my entire life being, shall we say, directionally challenged. I once found myself completely bemused,

when following a cross country route on the map, at finding myself in a rural dead end confronted by a five bar gate into a farmer's field. After I finally got home it was pointed out to me that what I had been following was not a cross country route at all but the county boundary.

However lest you think me completely irredeemable in this matter I will recall that some years ago I bought one of the very first examples of route finder software for my computer, which always gave three options for your journey. Living at that time in Portsmouth I once asked it for a route to York, and even I recognised that the one which suggested travelling via the Isle of Wight was less than ideal! Today I am eternally grateful for the arrival of Satnav. Even if I don't know where I am, the polite lady in the car with the nice voice unfailingly does.

So for me the question "Where am I?" is a familiar one. I suspect that we have all, at some time in our lives, found ourselves in that no man's land between sleep and wakefulness asking ourselves the twin questions: "Where am I?" and "Who am I?", especially if we have awoken in the middle of a more than usually surreal dream.

In fact, of course, the "Where am I?" question is generally easy enough to answer - it's just a matter of establishing location by some means, usually by recognising one's own bedroom. The other question is much more difficult to deal with, because we find that the more we examine it the more complex it becomes.

"Who are you?" I think that the first response of most of us would be to give the name by which we are known. In certain places and at certain times a person's

name has held an almost mystical power to define that person. In medieval French courtly literature, for example, you might find some mysterious unnamed knight playing a major part in the drama of the piece, whose name is at last revealed, and once you know his name, so the theory goes, you know everything about him. But this is no more than a literary device, and we know, when we think about it, that the name by which we are called is in reality no more than a label, a means of distinguishing me as one individual from the rest, a bit like those pieces of cardboard on a piece of string around the necks of children being evacuated from London at the beginning of the Second World War. It cannot really be said to tell you much about the person that I am, and in fact if I changed my name or adopted an alias for some nefarious purpose it would not in the least change who I am behind the label.

So we may go further and add what we do, our job or our profession. "My name is Barry Hammett and I'm a priest of the Church" adds something, but it is still little more than the introductions at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous (so I'm told!) - "My name is John Smith and I'm an alcoholic". It's not exactly a deep and comprehensive view of the person inside.

The full reality of the person that I am, the person that you are, is in fact the sum of a whole range of different factors. Its component parts include what we do and what we have done, our virtues and our vices, our strengths and our weaknesses, our successes and our failures. Moreover there are the likes and dislikes, the passions that we develop, the hobbies we enjoy, the causes to which we are committed, and not least, for us here this morning, the influence of our churchgoing.

Over and above those internal qualities, our characters are shaped and determined by a whole range of interactions. All the experiences we have had of the world have played their part, many of which have left behind the chips and dents on our character that make us distinctively different from our neighbour. And then, and arguably the most important, there are our relationships - husband, wife, partner, parents, children, our friends and our acquaintances, whose influence and presence throughout our lives have helped to mould us into the unique person of whom we can say "This is who I am".

Of all of these inter-personal relationships, that with our parents in our early years is arguably the most important, the most defining of our character and nature. We can recognise our own good fortune in the influence of our parents most clearly when we see the

effects of bad parenting in the world around us, of the dysfunctionality of families, ill treatment and abuse passing directly from generation to generation, becoming reinforced as it goes. So we are rightly thankful for loving parents and partners and for their influence upon us, and for secure homes, and we cherish our own, even after death has separated us from those we love most.

Because of all this, the words of Jesus to his disciples in this morning's Gospel reading are all the more startling. We are exhorted to hate all those who are dearest to us, all those to whom we owe such a debt of personal gratitude. And, indeed, our lives themselves. These words are nothing if not clear and forthright, and they appear to us to be utterly incomprehensible on the lips of our Saviour. They seem to be so out of kilter with the rest of his teaching - the

imperatives to love our brothers and sisters, to love even our enemies and not to hate them. They appear to us to be unbelievably harsh coming from one steeped in the ancient Jewish traditions, from one who, if we take seriously his nature as the Word of God made flesh, gave among others the commandment "Honour your father and your mother". And what are we then to make of the two seemingly unrelated examples that follow - the man undertaking a building project and the king deciding whether to go to war?

It seems to me that there are two ways in which the Gospel reading set before us today may be said to let us down. The first is a very familiar one, the perils of translation. Any linguist will say that good translation is not simply about substituting a word from one language for one from another language with the aid of

a dictionary. That way disaster lies, as anyone knows who has ever tried to make sense of a set of instructions seemingly translated from the original Korean via Japanese into English by someone whose only language is Serbo-Croat. It is, indeed, the hazard that lies behind some of the clumsier and more inaccurate moments in the Prayer Book Psalter, because its translator, Myles Coverdale, had little or no Hebrew or Greek, and so relied on Latin, French and predominantly German versions for his translation into English.

One of the problems faced by any translator is that while there may seem at face value to be a direct correlation between words in two languages, the reality is that they will seldom convey the same nuances, the same shades of meaning, so that little by little, as the word passes from language to language,

the whole meaning becomes distorted. In the Scriptures that may mean a journey from ancient Hebrew through Aramaic into Greek, into Latin and into English. In the process the cultural shading of the word can become completely lost to its ultimate hearer.

So it is here. A contemporary Jewish hearer would have reacted very differently from us to the word 'hate'. For us it carries all sorts of overtones of malicious feeling and intent, perhaps more so today than ever before with so much in the news about 'hate crimes' and with so many in public life (particularly at present Labour MPs) receiving torrents of 'hate mail' through social media. But throughout the Jewish tradition, and still in the time of Jesus, if you wanted to say that you preferred A to B you would say that you loved A and hated B. There were

none of the suggestions of malice that we attach to the word today.

If Jesus is not saying that we should hate those dearest to us in our modern-day terms, what is he saying? If we recognise what his (and Luke's) Jewish contemporaries would have understood by such a saying, we begin to see that he is telling his followers that they must give precedence to their discipleship above all things, however precious they may be to us. Our discipleship must be wholehearted. There can be no half measures, no matter how great our attachment to the things and the people we hold dear and to our very lives. Now, in the light of this, the two parables that follow make perfect sense. What would be the point of starting to build a tower unless you were confident of being able to complete it? Such a project requires both a weighing up of what it entails and a

wholehearted commitment to seeing it through. A king must assess the consequences of going to war and choose the right course of action, even though it may be personally costly to do so. Disciples of Jesus must make the same costly decisions as those in business and public life. There is no place among the followers of Jesus for those who are half-hearted in their commitment.

And now the second way in which our reading, or rather in this case our lectionary, lets us down. I often find myself bemused by the decisions taken by liturgical commissions, whether in the Church of England or, as here, in Rome, about where to end a given reading. In the case of the Gospel for today they have chosen to omit just three sentences at the end of the passage, further words of Jesus: "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?"

It is fit neither for the land nor for the dunghill; men throw it away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear". It seems to me that this sums up the meaning of all that has gone before. We are familiar with this portrayal of Christian disciples as the salt of the earth, as it appears elsewhere in the Gospels. Here it is an image that encapsulates the teaching Jesus has just given that our commitment to Christ can be nothing less than wholehearted. Salt is only of any value when it has its full flavour, otherwise it is worthless - and so it is to be for the followers of Jesus.

So we may breathe a brief sigh of relief on realising that we are not being instructed to turn on our nearest and dearest with malice and loathing, but the fact remains that this teaching of Jesus is forthright and clear, and directed at us today just as much as it was at directed at those who heard the words when they were first

spoken. Our lives in the developed world in the 21st Century are unimaginably more complex than lives have ever been before. We have only to reflect on the question, "If your house caught fire, what would you pick up and save first?" to realise just how things have changed. A householder in first century Palestine would have so much less to choose from than we do. The range of people and possessions that contribute to the shaping of who we are is vastly greater for us than for that person. We have, we may feel, so much more to give up if that is what we are called to do. The very fact that Jesus speaks of the cross in this passage is a reference to the personal costliness of his own obedience to God's will, and telling his followers of their calling to take up their own cross is a reminder that the Christian way is not necessarily a comfortable one. We are urged by this passage to remember that, however dear

to us may be those whom we love and all in our lives that make us who we are, we are to give priority to our discipleship over all those things. Following Jesus Christ is the way to true fulness of life, the way to discovering our true identity.

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple".

"Who am I?" I wonder how many of us would or could yet, in all conscience, reply: "My name is John Smith, and I am a disciple of Christ".

And "Where am I?" I suspect that for most of us the answer would be that I am still on the road, still trying to find the way, still directionally challenged, still coming to terms with the cost of discipleship - and yet encouraged by the knowledge that even if I do not know where I am there is

one who unfailingly does, the one who sustains me on the journey with his own body and blood in this great Sacrament, the one who constantly calls each and every one of us to step forward and follow him on the way that leads to life.