

The cost of following Jesus

Read: [Luke 14:25-33](#), [Psalm 139](#)

Spin doctors and PR

A Tamil family has been in the news a fair bit in this last week as the Federal government tries to deport them back to Sri Lanka. Depending who you listen to, this story has been presented in different ways.

If you listen to the Prime Minister or Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, then this family are illegal arrivals, only economic refugees and not genuine refugees and cannot be shown any leniency because that would restart the boats coming to Australia.

On the other hand, if you listen to other politicians and social media, this family is valued in their home community in Queensland, have a moral right to remain as the two daughters were born in Australia and extending them compassion will not have any effect on boat arrivals restarting.

Whose public relations spin do you believe? Who is presenting the whole truth in this episode? What is the 'right' outcome?

Clearly, Jesus didn't subscribe to any of these PR strategies. Rather than telling people what they want to hear, Jesus speaks in black and white terms, like a prophet. Today's reading falls into the category of '10 things you wish Jesus had never said' ... as he lays out how costly it will be for people to follow him. Similar sentiments occur in all four Gospels – increasing the likelihood of these being the authentic words of Jesus.

It's almost as if Jesus is deliberately wanting to turn people away by laying out unrealistic and even shocking demands. Unlike our tendency to make the demands

of discipleship easier in the hopes of attracting people or at least not scaring them off, Jesus goes the other way and makes it harder to follow him.

Even when we realise that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole – that is, deliberately exaggerating to make a point – it's still comes across as pretty harsh ...

- Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself cannot be my disciple ...
- Whoever does not carry the cross – an instrument of torture and death – cannot be my disciple ...
- Whoever does not give up all their possessions cannot be my disciple.

What makes it hard to follow Jesus?

These words make me wonder what sorts of things make it hard for people to become followers of Jesus today? Is it that the beliefs of Christianity – things like the resurrection of Jesus or the divinity of Jesus – seem obscure and irrelevant to everyday life? Is it the grief and sadness of losing a loved one and trying to reconcile the love of God with so much suffering in the world? Or is it that there have been so many stories in the media about the corruption and abuses perpetrated and covered up by clergy that the majority of people don't want anything to do with the church – or with Jesus.

Being a Christian in our Western culture is undoubtedly challenging at times, but in many places in the world being a follower of Jesus comes with much higher costs. Following Jesus may mean turning away from your family or having your family disown you. For the early Christians, being a witness for Jesus often meant being persecuted or even put to death ... it's one reason why the symbol of Christianity isn't a love heart but the cross.

If we turn the focus back to ourselves, though, I wonder what holds us back from more whole-hearted commitment to following Jesus and living out the Gospel? ... I

suspect it's likely to be our divided loyalties – we want to follow Jesus but also to enjoy life with our families and friends. We want to be generous towards others but also to cover our own financial or health needs. But perhaps what holds us back is our unwillingness to be ridiculed as a religious nutter, or to be ignored by our friends or even rejected by them. All these reasons, of course, fall short of the challenges Jesus threw out in today's readings.

So did Jesus really mean what he said about following him taking precedence over our family ties, our possessions and our concern for our own well-being? ... Unfortunately, I suspect Jesus did really mean what he said because he says it consistently and in various ways.

The context of the passage may help us understand it better. Jesus begins this section of the Gospel by describing God's great banquet that all are invited to. This is part of Jesus' wider message about the blessings of the kingdom of God where every person is welcomed, forgiven, loved and made whole, where justice rules and the poor do not miss out.

But lots of people are making excuses why they can't join God's kingdom project. Other things have higher priority in their lives right now – all of which sound quite reasonable – like looking after their money or their farm or their relationships. So these people – probably in the majority – reject Jesus' invitation as way too inconvenient. Others have witnessed his healings and heard his teaching and are attracted, but are sitting on the fence, not willing to put their full trust in this radical prophet from Galilee.

For the minority who remain interested, Jesus then questions how committed they are by raising the stakes. Reworking Jesus' words in light of his other teaching he seems to be asking people ...

- will we love the outsider and stranger and the least as much as our own family?
- Will we willingly share what we have with the poor and hold loosely to material possessions?
- Will we identify with Jesus as Lord and King – rather than Caesar – and so risk losing our life – as Jesus will – to follow God’s agenda – or will we play it safe and go with the flow?

So the invitation is put out there to every person. The costs are made painfully clear – this could cost your reputation and even your life. The several parables that follow about the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son and the lost job that we’ll explore over the next few weeks all point in one direction. God will continue to patiently seek out those who reject the invitation and find themselves ‘lost’ in the world. God will welcome them with love and compassion and joy when they turn and seek his ways. The welcome remains open – and the rewards are high – but so are the costs.

Counting the cost ... but responding anyway

What Jesus seems to be asking potential followers is whether they have complete and whole-hearted commitment to God’s kingdom project. Journeying with Jesus will potentially require us to bid farewell to what we hold near and dear. The language used is present tense which suggests it is an ongoing feature of discipleship. There will always be things that we have to give up. The symbol of the cross is appropriate – it will involve a kind of daily death.

Writing at a later time, the apostle Paul wrestles with this same question. All the things that he holds dear as a Jew – circumcision, being a zealous follower of God’s Law, seeking to live an upright life – he has given up to follow Jesus. Paul is prepared to walk in the footsteps of Jesus – including suffering and even death – that he might know Jesus intimately.

As a young adult with all my life before me, this call of Jesus to count the cost before committing to follow Jesus resonated strongly with me. It's why it took me nearly three years of soul searching to reach the decision that, yes, I wanted in, and that it would be an all or nothing commitment. I was prepared to follow Jesus wherever and whatever the cost.

The good news of today's passage – along with the Psalm – is that God calls us to persevere in the life of discipleship even when our circumstances seem tough. The cost may be high. We may be misunderstood by our families and mocked by others. We may have to let go of things we hold dear. But the psalm reminds us that wherever we go, and whatever we do, God is with us, always. When we are prepared to pay the cost – and to live a life of loving, serving and caring for the least, the outcast and the unlovely – that's when the gospel message shouts most loudly from our lives.

I want to close with a prayer of St Patrick ... I invite you to close your eyes ...

Let us pray ...

May the strength of God guide us.

May the power of God preserve us.

May the wisdom of God instruct us.

May the hand of God protect us.

May the way of God direct us.

May the shield of God defend us.

May Christ be with us! May Christ be before us!

May Christ be behind us, and Christ be in us!

May your grace, Lord, always be ours,

This day and forevermore. Amen.