

## **'Do not love your world': Becoming Followers**

**7 April 2019**

*The fifth in a series of six Lent Addresses on Discipleship given by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, during Lent 2019:*

**Prior Reading:** Luke 14 : 25-33



*The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer at a Confessing Church underground seminary 1937*

Over the past weeks, we have been thinking intently about what is needed to become a disciple of Jesus. We heard stories of call and immediate response, as Jesus walked alongside the shores of Lake Galilee, calling women and men to be his disciples. We heard stories of call and rejection, as some found the demands made of them in order to follow Jesus too hard. We heard what Jesus' call entailed: the lengths to which God will go in order to seek out and bring home those he invites to his friendship. And we reflected on what it means to be brought in, only then to be left behind immediately as God sets out to seek others that still do not know his friendship.

We learnt that Jesus' call is to all people, regardless of whether they already loved by God's rule, like the lawyers and Pharisees of his own age, or whether they lived contrary to God's command, like the tax collectors who flocked in such great numbers to come and hear Jesus teach. We were told that, in order to follow Jesus, each person, however long-established or new their journey of faith is, had to make the daily decision to be a disciple. And learnt that discipleship consisted both of the practical things that we do, or do not do, as well as the deliberate intention to be a disciple. Following Jesus means for each one of us to make the individual decision to be a disciple and to go where Jesus calls, doing what he calls us to do.

That call is first of all a call to self-denial, we learnt last week. We are to put self second and Jesus first in order to follow. Discipleship means denying ourselves daily, taking up our cross daily, and following, we reflected. When we follow, we are not left to our devices, we heard.

Even though each response is an individual response to follow, when we do become disciples of Jesus, we join a community of believers, a community of others who do what we do: listen out for Jesus' call to us, doing what he asks us to do, letting go of those things in which we need to deny ourselves, and sharing with others in shouldering the cross.

This process may seem daunting: but in our reflections we were assured that while all are called to let go, deny themselves and take on the cross, none of us would walk the way of discipleship alone. We would walk where Jesus had walked before, carry the cross with Jesus, in a community of cross bearers. We would each shoulder what we are able to carry – some would carry loads that we might find hard to carry, such as the load of giving our lives for Christ's sake – but none would carry more than they are able; none would carry something that Christ himself had not already carried. We all respond individually, but we all follow together.

And that, I think, will be a help in unlocking the rather uncompromising charge to aspiring disciples found in today's gospel reading. Jesus had taught large crowds about God's extravagant love and generous hospitality: God's kingdom was like a large feast, where there was not only abundant food but place aplenty at the table. There was in fact so much room, that God had to send out more people to fill each seat. God is generous, and God's kingdom a place of great hospitality. All people are invited, Jesus tells in his story. But each person needs to accept the invitation to celebrate with God. And each one of us does so by herself or himself. The invitation is a matter between the individual and God. It cuts right across any other ties we already have.

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'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children and even life itself, cannot be my disciple', Jesus tells the large crowds that were attracted by his teaching. In order to follow Jesus, you need to put Jesus before anyone, before anything else. The Son of God comes first, and then those he entrusts us to care for, and to care for us. There is a place for family relationships in God's kingdom. But Christ is the head of the family and comes first. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this: 'When we recognise Christ as the Son of God, the mediator, we have to loosen our ties with the world that surrounds us. This does not mean that the relationships we are called to no longer matter. They do. But they are mediated by Christ.'

When answering the call of Christ we do so alone, not as part of a family, or as part of a partnership. Each of us need to take the decision to discipleship as individuals. This is why St Paul exhorts us to pray for our partners, so that they, too may be enabled to make the decision we each are called to make. Bonhoeffer explains: 'Jesus' call to discipleship makes the disciple into a single individual. Whether disciples want to or not, they have to make a decision; each has to decide alone. It is not their own choice to desire to be single individuals. Instead, Christ makes everyone he calls into an individual. Each is called alone. Each must follow alone'.

When we respond to Christ's invitation we are to consider carefully whether the call to discipleship is for us. In each of the stories of call and response we heard this Lent, we saw how Christ leaves room for a genuine decision. Individuals are each given the opportunity to reject the invitation, are given space for the realisation that following Jesus is not for them. And that is a fair response to Jesus' call. Not all will follow. But all are called. If having their lives turned upside down by Jesus, if having their ties of relationships and occupation disrupted by Jesus is not for them, people need not follow. But those who do accept Jesus' call, need to put Jesus above all.

Bonhoeffer explains: 'Jesus' call itself already breaks the ties with the naturally given surroundings in which a person lives. It is not the person who breaks them; Christ himself broke them as soon as he called. Christ has untied the person's immediate concern with the world and bound the person immediately to himself. No one can follow Christ', Bonhoeffer knows, 'without recognising and affirming that that break is already complete'. Why do we need to be alone in order to focus on Christ, we rightly ask ourselves. Bonhoeffer responds: 'Christ intends to make the human being lonely. As individuals they should see nothing except him who called them'. If Christ truly is to be the mediator between God and humankind, the mediator of the new covenant of love, then Christ needs to mediate all relationships.

Bonhoeffer told the students at Finkenwalde Seminary that this is precisely the point of the Incarnation, the point of God becoming human in Christ Jesus: 'In becoming human, Jesus put himself between me and the given circumstances of the world. I cannot go back. He is in the middle. He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities'. When Christ calls, he cuts all ties. 'The bridges are already burnt', Bonhoeffer expressed it in his reflection on the call of Levi. And that exclusivity of calling – when Christ calls we either love him and follow or reject him and stay behind – leads to the stark language of 'hating' the world around us, 'even life itself'. If life with Christ is our goal, then life is not worth living if we are apart from Christ. Only with Christ is life worth living, and family ties worth sustaining, our gospel reading tells us. Because the moment I commit to following Christ, he stands between me and everything else.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: 'Jesus wants to be the mediator; everything should happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God. He also stands between me and the world, between me and other persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality'. For the followers of Christ, Christ is the mediator through whom we regard everything else in life. If we follow him, then we love him. And in the same binary pattern that underlies so much of Jesus' teaching, when we love one thing, we cannot also love another thing. We are reduced to hating that which has been ranked second.

'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'. Disciples are followers. Followers love the one who calls. When we become followers we love Jesus first. And hate all secondary relationships that are not mediated by Christ. Bonhoeffer affirms: 'If anyone or

any ideology prevents us from standing as individuals before Christ, responding individually to his call, then we need to make a decision to turn to, or away from Christ. If we truly turn to Christ, then we need to shun those who claim to be alternative mediators'. And that is what 'hating' the world means.

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You see, Jesus does not tell his disciples, you cannot love me and through me love your family. In fact, when the apostle Peter ask him precisely this question, he responds that those who love him first will reap a harvest of love, will gain family ties that are worth loving, that are lasting. Peter then questioned Jesus about the cost of discipleship: 'Look, we have left our homes and followed you.' And Jesus 'said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life"'. Bonhoeffer adds: 'Ever since Jesus called, there are no longer natural, historical or experiential unmediated relationships for his disciples. Christ the mediator stands between son and father, between husband and wife, between individual and nation, whether they can recognise him or not. There is no way from us to others than the path through Christ, through his word, and our following him'.

The idea that the followers of Jesus may relate to the world apart from their discipleship is alien to Bonhoeffer: 'immediacy is a delusion', he tells, and adds: 'the most loving sensitivity, the most thoughtful psychology, the most natural openness do not really reach the other person—there are no psychic immediacies. Christ stands between them. The way to one's neighbour leads only through Christ'. And just as Christ intercedes for us, so our concern for one another, our love for one another, is best expressed through intercession, Bonhoeffer tells: 'That is why intercession is the most promising way to another person. And common prayer in Christ's name is the most genuine community'. When Christ mediates all our relationships, our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with those we care for and those we entrusted to our careful concern, then we are united with God and one another through Christ. We may each have to respond alone to Christ's call. But once we have responded, we are set free to become a community of our shared love for Christ mediated by Christ's love.

Bonhoeffer puts it this way: although each one of us needs to respond as an individual to follow Christ's call, 'they find themselves again in a visible community which replaces a hundredfold what was lost. A hundredfold? Yes, in the mere fact that they now have everything solely through Jesus, that they have it through the mediator. ... The promise for those who follow Christ is that they will become members of the community of the cross; they will be people of the mediator, people under the cross'. That, Bonhoeffer knows, 'is the grace of the community which will follow its Lord under the cross'. Knowing the endpoint of our following sets into perspective the demands made of us. We will only ever be able to sustain the journey to the cross in the company of Christ, when we love him and reject the immediacy of the world around us, the world without Christ. We will only ever be able to shoulder the cross when we love Christ, and walk in his strength. And we will only ever

receive his strength through the mediated community of faith of the members of his own body.

In the week ahead I encourage you to reflect on three things:

- Firstly, think about how your own ties relate to the call of Christ. Do they stand in the way of you following where Jesus calls? Or has the call of Christ led you to new relationships and friendship, new community? Are there things you need to lay down, give up, in order to follow single-mindedly?
- Secondly, think about how you might relate to your family, your parents and loved ones through the mediation of Christ? What would it look and feel like to love those given to you through the strength of Christ's love alone? Are there things you need to take on, do more, to reflect the love of Christ in your own loving relationships with others? How can you let Christ's love shine forth through what you do?
- Finally, think about what it would be like to share in the same ministry that Christ does: what would it be like to journey as disciples knowing that you are sharing in the ministry of interceding for others on their behalf, just as Christ intercedes for you. Would the cost of discipleship be lesser and the burden of taking up the cross daily be lighter if you were part of a community of people who interceded for one another in the same way Christ prays for us. What stops you from praying in this self-giving, generous way, for those around you, and for our world? How can you be more intentional shaping community through common prayer?

Those who follow will receive infinitely more than that which they leave behind, Jesus answers the disciples who ask themselves whether their sacrifice has been of value. But of far greater value is the sacrifice of the one who loved us first and called us. 'There is no genuine love for the world', Bonhoeffer explains, 'except the love with which God has loved the world in Jesus Christ. "Do not love the world", but "God so much loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life'.

## STUDY QUESTIONS LENTEN STUDIES, STUDY FIVE

Consider **Luke 9:23-25** (from last week's Gospel) and **Luke 14:25 – 27** (from this week's Gospel) printed below.

**Luke 9:23** Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. <sup>25</sup> What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

**Luke 14:25** Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup> "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. <sup>27</sup> Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

1. How do these two statements of Jesus illuminate each other? What do you find challenging about the statements? In what ways are they encouraging?

(a) In his sermon the Dean commented on this quote from Bonhoeffer:

*Bonhoeffer explains: "Jesus' call itself already breaks the ties with the naturally given surroundings in which a person lives. It is not the person who breaks them; Christ himself broke them as soon as he called. Christ has untied the person's immediate concern with the world and bound the person immediately to himself. No one can follow Christ", Bonhoeffer knows, "without recognising and affirming that that break is already complete". Why do we need to be alone in order to focus on Christ? we rightly ask ourselves. Bonhoeffer responds: 'Christ intends to make the human being lonely. As individuals they should see nothing except him who called them'. If Christ truly is to be the mediator between God and humankind, the mediator of the new covenant of love, then Christ needs to mediate all relationships.*

2. Do you agree with Bonhoeffer's assertion that "No one can follow Christ without recognising and affirming that that break (with the world) is already complete"?
3. (a) What might "the break from the world" look like?  
(b) Does this mean that the Christian loses their own personality and free choice?
4. In his sermon the Dean stated, "if Christ truly is to be the mediator between God and humankind, the mediator of the new covenant of love, then Christ needs to mediate all relationships."  
  
(a) In what way does Christ mediate our relationships within our families, workplaces and the church?
5. In his sermon the Dean quoted Bonhoeffer who wrote: "*The way to one's neighbour leads only through Christ*". The Dean then said: *And just as Christ intercedes for us, so our concern for one another, our love for one another, is best expressed through intercession, Bonhoeffer tells: 'That is why intercession is the most promising way to another person. And common prayer in Christ's name is the most genuine community'.*

- (a) How can we better enact this principle of intercession both personally and within our Cathedral community?

**Questions posed by the Dean at the end of his sermon for us to reflect upon this week:**

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**Prayer**

*Almighty God, whose beloved Son for our sake willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross: give us courage and patience to take up our cross daily and follow him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, now and for ever. **Amen***