The cost of discipleship ***by Rev John Castle***

A sermon given on 30th August 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Readings: Jeremiah 15:15-21, Matthew 16:21-28

Introduction

A Chicken and a Pig lived on a farm. The farmer was very good to them and they both wanted to do something good for him.

One day the chicken approached the pig and said, "I have a great idea for something we can do for the farmer! Would you like to help?"

“Sure” said the pig. “What is it that you propose?"

The chicken knew how much the farmer enjoyed a good healthy breakfast. "Well, I'm sure he would love a good breakfast", she said.

“OK”, said the pig thoughtfully. “What do you suggest we make him for breakfast?"

The chicken thought about what she could offer and said, “How about eggs and bacon?"

"That's all very well for you”, replied the pig. “All you'd have to do is to make a contribution. But for me that would mean total commitment!"

Jeremiah's complaint

Commitment can be costly. In our Old Testament reading, Jeremiah is complaining to God about the persecution he is experiencing from the royal authorities as a result of his bold proclamation of messages from God - messages that are critical of the corruption and idolatry that are endemic in his society. Yesterday in the church calendar was the Memorial of the Beheading of our patron saint , John the Baptist, whose willingness to speak up against a ruler's unlawful action cost him his life.

In our gospel reading Jesus warns that the religious authorities of his time are planning to have him killed. He goes on to say that those who want to be his disciples need to be willing to sacrifice their own interests, to deny themselves, in order to find life. And he throws out a challenge: what's the point of gaining the whole world if you lose your soul? But if you lose your life for me, you will find it again.

Suffering and persecution were a common experience of Christians in the first three centuries of the church. Persecution sharpened the faith and commitment of believers, and the examples of those who gave their lives for the faith inspired others to stand up for what they believed, even at risk to themselves and their families. You will be familiar with the phrase, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church". These Christians took the words of Jesus seriously.

Perpetua and her companions

Some of my heroes from church history are two young women called Perpetua and Felicity, who were martyred in 202 AD in

Carthage, North Africa with three Christian men, under the persecution of the Emperor Septimus Severus.[1].

Perpetua was a 22-year old married woman from a prosperous family. She had a baby son, and she had recently become a Christian. Unlike many accounts of early Christian martyrs, which were often written some time later and include embellishments, the story of Perpetua comes from a first-hand account – her own diary which she wrote in prison, where she was with a young pregnant slave woman, called Felicitas, or Felicity in modern English. The diary was treasured by the Church in Carthage, and was incorporated into an account of their martyrdoms called *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,*[2] which you can read online. Perpetua's story has continued to inspire Christians over the centuries.

In her diary, Perpetua tells of her father coming to visit her in prison with her baby so that she could breast-feed him, and how her father tried to persuade her to save her life by renouncing her faith. This is how she tells the story:

My father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. 'Father,' I said, 'do you see this vase here, or waterpot or whatever?'

'Yes, I do', he said. And I said to him: 'Could it be called by any other name than what it is?' And he said: 'No.'

'Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.'

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetua_and_Felicity
[2] https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0324.htm

Shortly before her death in the arena, Perpetua gave her diary to another Christian who added to it a description of her bravery in the arena, where she and Felicity and three other Christians faced wild animals. The two women were beheaded.

Persecution today

It would be comforting to think that persecution for one's faith was a thing of the past. But, like slavery, it is very much a feature of today's world. In 2018 the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, commissioned Bishop Philip Mountstephen, then Bishop of Truro, to undertake an independent review of the persecution of Christians throughout the world.[3] The Review found that persecution on grounds of religion affected in some way a third of the population of the world, and that 80% of those persecuted were Christians.

"Violent persecution exists in many forms", the report says. "Firstly there is mass violence which regularly expresses itself through the bombing of churches, as has been the case in countries such as Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia, whereby the perpetrators raise levels of fear amongst the Christian community and attempt to suppress the community's appetite to practice its right to public expression of freedom of religion and belief.

"State militaries attacking minority communities which practice a different faith to the country's majority also constitutes a violent threat to Christian communities such as the Kachin and Chin people of Myanmar and the Christians of the Nuba mountains of Sudan. The torture of Christians is widespread in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Eritrean

[3] https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/report/

prisons, and beatings in police custody are widely reported in India.

“Extrajudicial killings and the enforced and involuntary disappearance of Christians are also widespread. These violent manifestations of persecution can be perpetrated by the state... These acts are also perpetrated by non-state actors such as Muslim extremists who systematically target and kidnap Christian girls in Pakistan..."

You may be aware of many other examples.

It is all too easy for Christians in countries like ours to be ignorant of the suffering of our brothers and sisters elsewhere. But we should also be aware that Christians in this country too can fall foul of those who object to their views on matters such as abortion, sexual identity and marriage.

Discipleship and us

So what does discipleship mean for us? Being imprisoned for your faith like Christians in China or dying in the arena like Perpetua? Probably not. You and I will probably have the least to lose in being disciples of Jesus, but just as much to gain.

Jesus' own example of being obedient to his Father's will, to the point of death, his words about taking up our cross to follow him, and the example of Christians throughout the world should lead us to ask ourselves, what does our Christianity really mean to us? Are we just Sunday church attenders, or are we disciples of Jesus?

I'd like to quote from a sermon given by an ordinand at my last church, Mungo Walls. I couldn't put this better myself, so is an extract from his sermon:

"Jesus calls us to 'carry our cross' and follow Him. This imagery would have been profoundly humbling to His audience. To us, the cross is a sign we are happy, even proud, to be associated with. After all, it is only through the crucifixion of Jesus on a cross that we have hope in salvation. But to people of Jesus's time, the cross was a symbol of suffering, shame and oppression; it was the method used by the occupying Romans to execute criminals. Those criminals who dragged their crosses through the streets of Jerusalem bore the scorn of all who saw them, and so it would require a willingness to lay aside pride and self-interest and be truly humble even to take up a cross metaphorically...

"Jesus' words challenge us to consider what it means to give our whole selves to God. This isn't about a one-time decision but a daily practice. It's easy to fall into a routine of faith—attending church on Sunday, saying grace before meals—without letting these practices transform our lives.

"True discipleship calls for a deeper commitment. It means aligning our actions, our thoughts, and our desires with God's will, especially when it's inconvenient or costly. It's about living out our vocation every day, not just when it's easy or expected."

When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment, he quoted two from the Law of Moses: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. And as an example of loving your neighbour, he told the story of the Good Samaritan, a man who

showed sacrificial love to a person from another ethnic group and religion, spending time, effort and money on him.[4]

Jesus' teaching and example show us that being a Christian, or a disciple of Jesus, isn't just about the personal benefit to us of knowing that God loves us and will help and guide us through our lives. It's about putting God first in every aspect of our lives, and this includes putting ourselves out for others.

Priorities

If we want to check what our real priorities in life are, we need only to consider how we spend our time, talents and money. How much time, skill and money do we spend on prayer and worship, helping others around us, and supporting the work of the church and the relief of suffering worldwide? I know that this church (and all others I have known) runs on the goodwill and giving of a small number of people.

The temptation we all face is to attend first of all to our own needs and wants, and then to give a part of what is left over to God and other people. That's not what Jesus asks of us.

> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?[5]

Last week the media made a big thing of the death of the American singer-song-writer Dolly Parton. Tributes to people after their death are often glowing, so did some research on Dolly Parton. I discovered that her way of treating others, and

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[4] Luke 10:25-37

[5] Matthew 16:25-26 NRSV

her many philanthropic donations to different causes, particularly in the field of education, were underpinned by a strong personal faith. She used her wealth as a vehicle for her compassion. Like her, we are challenged to "put our money where our mouth is".

We are accountable

Jesus also reminds us in today's reading that when he comes again as our judge, we will have to give an account for how we have lived our lives – how we have spent the time, talents and opportunities God has given us.

> For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

And elsewhere he reminds us that

> From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.[6]

The demands of following Jesus are total. But the rewards are also amazing. What could give your life a greater meaning and purpose than to be part of a worldwide movement initiated by the Son of God which aims to share the love of God with everyone? What greater satisfaction can you have than seeing the relief on a person's face when you have spent time listening to them pouring out their troubles and finding that they are not alone, and that someone cares? Or what can beat the knowledge that a generous gift you have made enabled a family in Africa to secure their livelihood through starting a

[6] Luke 12:48 NRSV

small business, so that they can feed their children and send them to school?

But better than all these will be hearing the words of our Saviour when he comes again, saying "well done, good and faithful servant".

The next step

The road to total commitment to Christ may consist of several steps. As I finish, I'd like each of us to consider what might be the next step God would like us to take towards being a 100% full-on disciple of Jesus? What sacrifice could we make this week in terms of, for example, time spent in prayer, time made for others who need our help or encouragement, or a re-evaluation of our finances, so that we can set aside more for giving to the work of Christian mission and the relief of suffering?

Are we content to just make a contribution, or would we like to make a total commitment of our lives to God? I'll finish with the words of a modern American missionary martyr, Jim Elliott: *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.*

Let us pray.

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have won for me, for all the cruel pains and insults you have borne for me. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.