Sermon for 23rd in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33.

i

I have never heard of a Christian who has plucked out his eye, or chopped off his hand in order to resist temptation – yet Jesus told us to do just that in Matthew 5:29-30. In similar fashion, we have also ignored for the last two thousand years the instruction to “hate” our father, mother, wife and children from today’s passage in Luke 14:26-27.

Christians have never taken such words literally; they have been interpreted as hyperbolic language employed by rabbis in a pre-literary age to make sure a point of teaching was remembered. The fact that we can read these words today shows that the technique works – so long as we still remember the message they are intended to convey.

Jesus then speaks of a tower that is being built, saying the builder had better make sure he has the means to complete it, or the ridicule he will suffer would be worse than if he had never started to build in the first place. It would be like a king contemplating war; if he has any sense he will assess the strength of the enemy first and make peace if he cannot win before the enemy knows of his weakness.

What is all this about?

Well in Jesus’ day there was a lot of very important building going on that would determine the future course of the Jewish people.

A tower is a structure of the state; it is a construction prepared for war. In Jesus’ day, the zealot party was gaining rapidly in strength. They were preparing for war. They wanted an armed insurrection against Rome and they were hoping a Messiah would come to lead them to victory. Gamaliel mentions two such would-be military Messiahs, Theudas and Judas the Galilean in Acts 5:36-37.

If the zealots were to have their way and provoke an armed rebellion, would they be victorious? The horrors of the later Jewish-Roman wars in the following decades proved that their plans were a fantasy, and the destruction and death that followed thoroughly condemned the project from its inception.

The temple in Jerusalem was also under reconstruction in Jesus’ day. Herod had started the rebuild forty years ago, and now in the days of his son, Herod Antipas, it still wasn’t complete. Would it ever be completed? The war with Rome saw its destruction in AD70. Only the “wailing wall” remains of it to this day.

Jesus comes along and in this setting starts a huge building project of his own – only he is no longer building in stone and iron, but in Spirit. Jesus is doing what Jeremiah had proclaimed so long before – Jesus is reworking the clay.

This means that the old material is being taken and re-worked into a new pot. Jesus is remoulding the kingdom, the nation, the Law, the temple and giving them new, spiritual meaning.

The kingdom is a kingdom without geographical boundaries and is open to every nation on the earth. People are not born as citizens of this kingdom, but become citizens of this new nation, the New Israel, through faith and baptism.

The king of this new kingdom is not like the potentates of Herod’s dynasty or the imperial majesty of Roman emperors, but is humble and peaceful and rides on a donkey.

The law of this new kingdom is not the heavy burden of the Law of Moses and its interpretations, but is light and easy to wear, calling its new citizens to love God and love their neighbour as themselves.

The temple of this new kingdom has not been turned into a den of thieves, but is a temple not made with human hands, but one raised up on the third day, a living temple into which each believer is incorporated as a living stone, built upon the one true foundation, Jesus Christ.

The true enemy of the people was not Rome. This is not to say that Roman imperialism was all that was good, but that they mistook the political and earthly battle for the true spiritual battle that Jesus came to fight.

The enemies of the kingdom of heaven were the evil powers and spiritual principalities (Ephesians 6:12), the reactionary hierarchy in Jerusalem, the zealot party straining for war, and the fear that made followers run away.

To follow Christ into his new kingdom inevitably meant leaving the political and religious kingdom of their tradition and of their family. To follow Christ and leave the security of one’s biological family behind to join a new family of brother and sister believers in Christ – really did call for a willingness to leave everything behind and follow Christ (Luke 14:33).

ii

We find such talk stirring. We like to think of ourselves as heroically following Christ. But for most of us, the worst we experience is the mockery of a sceptical world, but for the people of the first Christian centuries, the cost of following Christ were always high, and often they paid the ultimate price.

The personal cost of discipleship has to be faced by Philemon. It may not be a matter of life or death for him, but the challenge is very real and very personal.

Philemon is challenged by Paul’s letter on behalf of the runaway slave, Onesimus.

God is reworking the clay in a very dramatic fashion; God is transforming Onesimus into something completely new. Can Philemon change the habits of a lifetime? Can Philemon risk scandalising his neighbours by treating Onesimus in a new way?

Will Philemon receive his runaway slave as a brother in Christ? Will he send Onesimus back to the slave quarters, or give him a guest room and receive him just as he would receive Paul himself?

iii

Once again, it is comforting to point our finger at the lack of response of the Sadducees and Pharisees, at the fickleness of the Holy Week crowds, and at the indifference of Rome, symbolised by Pilate’s cynical washing of his hands. But our own Church history is bursting with examples of intransigence, lack of vision, crippling fear and spiritual sloth.

An uncomfortable number of those we came to revere, encountered resistance in their early years. St. Francis struggled initially to shake off the duties of family; Wesley was barred from Anglican pulpits and was chased out of town at the instigation of fellow Anglican priests. What if Peter Waldo, Martin Luther, Jan Hus, John Wycliffe had received a sympathetic hearing instead of the instinctive intransigence of the religious leaders of their day?

I feel a similar despondency when I survey my own church today.

The Methodist Movement grew out of Wesley’s willingness to allow God to remould the clay. Wesley was a High Church Anglican for whom proper ecclesiastical order and decorum mattered dearly. It was only with some anguish that he could “consent to become more vile” and join the ranks of the despised field preachers.

As one who desired “constant communion” but treasured the consecration of holy orders he had to wrestle hard with the decision to ordain preachers to preside at Methodist services, and initially at least, he struggled with permitting lay people to become preachers. Fortunately, he coped pretty well with allowing the Spirit to remould the clay in his hands.

Methodism was able to come to birth because he found the heart to allow God to do something new through him and to him and with him.

Such flexibility, vision, hope and trust in God is rarely found today in large measure among the Methodists I know. Yet if God is to use us to “serve the present age”, as Charles Wesley’s hymn puts it, we simply must allow God to throw the clay back on the wheel and, to use the words of a hymn once more, “praise God for all that is past, and trust him for all that’s to come.”

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