

Cost? What Cost?

Pentecost 15 - 5th September 2010

Readings:

Luke 14: 25-33

“Lord, my heart is not large enough, my memory is not good enough, my will is not strong enough”:

Take my heart and enlarge it, take my memory and give it quicker recall, take my will and make it strong and make me conscious of you, ever-present, ever accompanying. AMEN.

In early 1999, I received a phone call from a travel agent. A friend had passed my name on to her. She wanted to give me something for nothing. Now I don't know if you've ever been offered something for nothing. When it happens to me, I'm immediately on my guard. Well her "something for nothing" was an all expenses paid trip to the great passion play held every ten years at Oberrameggau in Austria. All expenses paid AND an allowance of A\$80 per day! I would be the spiritual leader for a group of pilgrims. So it wasn't exactly something for nothing. But I would not be required to put the hard sell on anyone else to join the trip. I asked for it in writing! And a week later I got the written assurance. But wait! There's more! She said if I was willing to go to Israel I could lead a group there - preparing them for the passion play, and they would even pay half Jenny's fare!

Too good to be true? Something for nothing? Well the answer to the first question is YES! and the second - NO. Six months later I read in 'The Age' where my travel agent was being taken to court for dishonest practices, and a lot of people lost a lot of money. There's no such thing as a free lunch!

But sometimes that's just what we think in our churches. We can belong to the tour, but we don't need to pay anything. In fact our churches should be looking after us. It's a fact that those churches that have lots of income, usually in the form of property income from properties no longer used in ministry, are often the churches who find discipleship hard. So they pay an ordained minister to do it.

Cobb & Co started off in this country during our gold rush days. It was a great form of privatized public transport. And they had a unique form of ticketing. You could get first, second and third class tickets. And the ticket affected the kind of ride you got. If you had a first class ticket, that meant you could remain seated throughout the entire trip no matter what happened. If the stagecoach got stuck in the mud or had trouble making it up a steep hill, or even if a wheel fell off, you could remain seated, because you had a first class ticket. If you had a second class ticket, you could also remain seated - until there was a problem. In the event of a problem, second class ticket holder had to get off until the problem was resolved. You could stand off to one side and watch as other people worked. You didn't have to get your hands dirty. And when things were fixed up for you, you could get back on board. But if you had a third class ticket, you definitely had to get off if there was a problem. Because it was your responsibility to help solve the problem. You had to get out and help fix the broken wheel or push up the hill or do whatever was needed, because you only had a third class ticket.

I'd like to think that in the church, we all had third class tickets, but sadly, it would appear, many appear to have first and second class tickets.

In today's gospel we are told by Luke that great crowds were following Jesus. Multitudes! Jesus is becoming a great success. And who can argue with the numbers. But what does Jesus say to the crowd?

He tells them to count the cost of following him. (Could you imagine one of our politicians on the electoral trail asking us to count the cost of voting for them?)

If you're going to be fair dinkum about following Jesus you should know that to be a disciple there is a cost. There's no such thing as a free lunch.

Yet this may be a particularly difficult word for the church to hear. Among some advocates of church growth movements, there is much talk of creating user-friendly churches. Churches that are accessible to everyone. In fact that has been one of my own catch-cries. In user friendly churches anyone ought to be able to walk off the street and immediately feel at home. In user friendly churches all the songs ought to be readily singable, as easy and memorable as advertising jingles. And sermons should be easy to understand, not too challenging - and certainly no longer than the time between ad breaks! Everything is offered without cost.

It's all very well to talk of inclusivity and accessibility to all, but as our gospel this morning reminds us starkly - there is also a cost to being a disciple. Jesus urges us to count the cost. To be single-minded in our devotion to the gospel.

On other occasions you have heard me rail against single-minded fundamentalist, we see the effect of fundamentalism on all sides these days. The excesses of fundamentalism are enough to make you weep. But you know, our passage today advocates a type of fundamentalism. But it is one that talks about single-minded in service. It is one that talks about a single-mindedness that would change the world, through selfless love. It's a single-mindedness that always leads to the cross and the bearing of the Cross.

The almost blasphemous triumphalism of a fundamentalism that seeks power over others is what Jesus railed against and it was his own humble single-mindedness that led him to be crucified.

That's why Jesus brought the crowd up short with his demand that his followers give up everything, family, wealth, position. To count the cost. And the difference with Jesus' single-mindedness was that he was willing to sacrifice himself so that others might live.

And our church, in this time of easy answers, in this time of individualism, in this time when religion is used by many to further wealth, ideology and power, our church needs to grasp hold of the serving single-minded of the gospel.

Jesus asks the crowd, he asks us, to count the cost of following him.

My question to each of you here this morning is - what cost do each of us pay in being a follower of Christ? Is our zeal for the gospel of Jesus Christ such that we surrender all? This morning's gospel lesson is not an easy one for any of us. But it is a message that runs through the gospels from first verse to last. Jesus asks if we are willing to lose our life to gain our life.

And the sad thing is that sometimes each of us fail to live up to this request of Jesus. I know I do. We have too much to lose. And that's the curse of living in an affluent society such as ours. But the demand is always there. Jesus says: "Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of his father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters, yes even one's self! - can't be my disciple. And anyone who won't shoulder their own cross and follow behind me, can't be my disciple."

Jesus was not about church growth. If he was he'd have made it easier for the crowds that followed him. The huge congregations that followed him melted away when he let them know his demand on each of their lives.

Jesus makes the same demands on each of our lives. Are we will to pay the price?

Rev Tony Duncan
5th September 2010
pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au