

LUKE 9:51-62
THE PRICE OF FAITH

A man is struggling to get through the door; the door is quite narrow and he is laden down with luggage. He is trying without much success to get through the door which will not open any wider; he just cannot get himself and all his luggage through the door. He has a choice to make. It is a one-way door; once he's through, he can't go back; so if he leaves his luggage behind, it is left and he can't make more than one trip! So he has a dilemma: does he go through the door on his own, leaving his luggage behind? Or does he give up trying to go through the door at all? No matter how hard he tries, the choice and dilemma will not go away because the door just will not let him and all his luggage through. It is an acted out parable of the choice we make when we're Christians: Jesus wants us to be disciples and follow Him, but we sometimes say "I'll be a disciple of Jesus if I can keep all my bad habits, or "... if I can use my time as I want"; or "...if I can...", "if I can...", "if I can...". This is some of the luggage that we want to keep, to take through the door, but does some of it have to be left behind to be disciples of Jesus?

"The great tragedy of modern evangelism is in calling many to faith but few to obedience." (Jim Wallis, *Agenda for biblical people* p.9) Let's unpick that a little. When we tell people about being a Christian, because we want to persuade them to come to faith too, we tell them how good it is. We tell them how good it is to believe in Jesus and how much of God's blessing we will enjoy as a result of our faith. We tell people that it is simply a good thing to do, to live our lives by faith in Jesus. Of course, that is all true. The danger is that we soft-pedal the commitment side; we forget to tell people that being a disciple means some kind of commitment to Jesus; sometimes people discover this later and they give up because it is not what they expected. The choices and dilemmas are too much for them. Ironically, some of the fastest growing Christian churches are ones which make that commitment plain from the start; there is no soft pedal but it is clear as to what we sign up for. Faith and obedience to Jesus go hand in hand.

There is a cost to faith. There is news from all across the world of Christians who are facing up to the cost of faith in Jesus. There are Christians in Pakistan who are persecuted for their faith; their family disown them, and count them as dead because of Christian faith and some are even beaten and killed. Some Christians in Nigeria meet for worship today in fear and trembling because their churches are attacked and people are killed. Even in the UK, there are Christians who try to live out their Christian faith and by Christian values but find that they are in the minority and are forced to make these choices: do we conform to the culture or not? It is hard!

Jesus never promised it would be any other way. There is a fascinating little series of job interviews for the job of disciple! These are three people that Jesus meets, who either apply for the job or are asked to sign up and for each of them there is a cost to being a disciple; we don't know whether they signed up or whether they went away. We'll look at these in a minute, but we need to see these in the context of what had just gone before. "*As the...*" (Luke 9:51) Literally "He set His face to go to Jerusalem." It took some time to complete the journey, but this is a turning point in the story Luke is telling. There is a sense of determination and commitment about these words; Jesus resolutely set Himself to go to Jerusalem, knowing that He would be taken up to heaven, but also knowing that before He would be glorified in this way, He would also be crucified. He was determined and committed to doing the will of God, but it came at a cost, at a price and that price what His own life. He was crucified for us, to be our the Saviour. He set His face to Jerusalem knowing that and

prepared for it. So when Jesus challenges us about our commitment in these three job interviews, He does it as someone who has already done it Himself.

1. Know what is involved – the first man is a volunteer: “*As they...*” (Luke 9:57f) It’s exciting; there is a crowd of people walking together and there’s a buzz about it and an atmosphere about it that is good, that’s catching and we’d hope that Church is still the same; there is something about the buzz and atmosphere of Church to draw people to Jesus! This man volunteers to be a disciple and he might expect that Jesus would welcome him with open arms; volunteers are always good! But Jesus does something else: He tells the man that there is a down-side, there is a cost to being a disciple: “*Foxes have...*” (Luke 9:58) “This is what it means to be a disciple; this is what it means to follow me” says Jesus. “I have nowhere quite to call home!” The man had to count up what it meant. Did he imagine that being a disciple meant staying in all the best hotels, in Samaria, Galilee, Jerusalem? Did he imagine that they’d be welcomed and feted everywhere they went? Jesus paints another picture, the picture of a man who has no regular place to stay; we’ve already seen the Samaritans show their hatred and opposition. Know what’s involved; realise that there is a cost; see what it is that you’re signing up for!

2. “Not yet!” the second man was invited by Jesus “*Follow me*” (Luke 9:59) How are we to understand the rest of the conversation? “*But the...*” (Luke 9:59f) Jesus approves of the social life that God has created for the world. There is nothing to suggest otherwise. Marriage, children, family life, love for people in need – these are all part of Jesus’ manifesto for living. So we need to see this conversation in that light. It has been suggested that the man’s father was very much alive; Jesus is not preventing him from going to his father’s funeral, but the man is saying “not yet” to Jesus. “I’ll become a disciple when I’m ready; when I think time is right, on my terms!” There was another duty for this man that was more important to him than being a disciple; the time might be when that would change, but not yet! We are part and parcel of the social life that God has created for the world, family life etc and these are normally the ways in which we are called to live. The challenge of this story is “what happens when these demands conflict?” This is a crucial question! Jesus challenges this man to consider kingdom priorities. The danger of “not yet” is that there might not be another time; there might not be another opportunity; Jesus might not pass that way again!

3. “Looking back!” The third man is another volunteer “*I will...*” (Luke 9:61f) Again his offer seems well-meant and his request reasonable. Other times, Jesus told people that He’d healed to go home and tell people what had happened and some He even insisted stay at home and not come with Him. So what here? The offer to be a disciple seems good on the surface, but does it hide just a bit of reluctance? Does Jesus see that if the man goes home, he won’t come back? That his family ties are too strong and will actually prevent him from becoming a disciple? Try walking forwards in a straight line while looking back over your shoulder! I’d suggest you try driving a tractor forwards while looking backwards, but it is dangerous and you would crash; some farmers can manage it for a little while, but it is impossible to drive in a straight line going in one direction while looking in another. This man wanted to follow Jesus but on his own terms, but Jesus is Lord and wholeheartedness is a quality that Jesus looks for in His disciples. This man discovered that he couldn’t be a disciple and keep all his luggage.

Christian faith comes at a cost. When I was a teenager, in the Youth Fellowship at Church, there was a girl in the group and at one stage her parents strongly resisted her attending. What was she to do? As a Christian she wanted to be there and to learn about faith and Christian life, but she didn’t want to go against her parents’

wishes. I can't remember how she resolved the issue, but there was a clear conflict in her mind. The Church of Scotland ministers' pension fund at one stage was amongst the lowest ranking funds based on its returns; the areas of investment giving the biggest returns were alcohol and tobacco, but the fund managers were told that they couldn't invest in these because the Church would not invest in these areas. My son was part of an SU summer trip to Zanzibar a few years ago, going to help build part of a school, but the project was delayed because SU refused to pay the bribe that was 'required' to get the building warrant through quickly; they had to have a plan B and use their time differently. Faith comes at a price at times; when these demands conflict, which way do we go?

Wholeheartedness is the challenge at the heart of these job interviews. We can get caught up in the details of conversations and miss the big picture; Jesus wants us to be wholehearted disciples. There are so many ways in which that wholeheartedness is undermined: by distractions, because other things take greater priority, by excuses, because we're not willing to embrace the price of faith. Be clear: we are wholehearted as (grand)parents – Jesus' challenge for us is to be wholehearted Christian (grand)parents; we are wholehearted husbands or wives – Jesus' challenge is for us to be wholehearted Christian husbands or wives; we are wholehearted in the way we approach our work – Jesus' challenge is for us to be wholehearted Christians at work. This is not about stepping back from the ordinary world in which we spend every day, but is about being wholehearted disciples of Jesus in that everyday world, taking Jesus' values and standards into that world and living by them, living out that faith. Someone said "not yet; I'll do it later"; another that he wanted to do it on his own terms – both had allowed something else to get in way, to distract them.

Jesus "talked the talk", but He also "walked the walk". The preacher can explain the challenge of being a disciple, but is not as good at doing it as he might be. Jesus has done it perfectly. He was ready to meet the challenge. His ministry had exactly same challenge, to be wholehearted in doing the will of God, yet there was a cost. Jesus set out with determination and commitment to go to Jerusalem; He knew the cost of that commitment from the start, that it would cost Him His life, yet He still went. So when Jesus says to us "follow me; be my disciple" He knows exactly what that means. It would be easy to soft pedal this sense of commitment and cost, to be like some US evangelists – "come to Jesus and all your troubles will be over! Come to Jesus and life will be perfect peace! All your questions will be answered!" Jesus' version is different: "follow me and carry your own cross!" There is a cost to faith at times; there is a price – Jesus wants us to obey Him; He wants us to follow Him, and He challenges us to put into practice these Christian values and standards in every aspect of our lives. There are dilemmas and choices to face: how much luggage can we get through the door? How much luggage will we have to leave behind? Is this daunting? Is it off-putting? This is what we're called to be, whole-hearted disciples, seeking to obey and follow Jesus!