

Sometimes, whole communities are overwhelmed by tragedy. The Haiti earthquake was called the worst natural disaster in the area for two centuries. The earthquake devastated the whole area. At such times, people often give generously. Individual lives, too, are sometimes overwhelmed by tragedy. At the beginning of June, news filtered through that a gunman in Cumbria had killed twelve people and injured a further 25. People in such situations, like Haiti and Cumbria, need more than sympathy or donations. They also need people who can give time and effective help of one kind or another – people who leave everything immediately and go as a matter of urgency to where they are needed. Sincere emotions and good intentions are worthless unless they are backed up by serious and, where necessary, self-sacrificing commitment.

In today's Gospel reading from Luke we find Jesus rebuking the disciples James and John because they want to call down fire from Heaven to burn up the Samaritan village that has rejected Jesus. Jesus refused to punish the Samaritans and didn't hold any bitterness towards them.

This gentleness towards the Samaritans seems to contrast with Jesus' hard words to the three men volunteering to join Him in His mission. The first volunteer was invited to consider that he would become a 'homeless wanderer' like Jesus. The second expresses the quite reasonable wish to go first to bury his father; and the third, to say goodbye to his family. However, the last two men may not have been serious in their intentions and hearing what Jesus said to the first man, were making believable sounding excuses for going home, perhaps, without any serious intention of returning to Jesus at all. Whatever the precise context of Jesus' words, they emphasise that following Jesus requires total commitment and allows no time for delay.

There is no less urgency in following Christ today than there was in Jesus' day. The world is broken and can't fix itself. Hatred of one group of people for another is an urgent issue for the victims of ethnic cleansing. Malnutrition doesn't wait as it advances on the multitudes of children whose lives are wasting away in hunger. The empty values of the world around us have created a vacuum in the lives of many people we know.

Even in our day-to-day lives most of us operate as though we have all the time in the world to attend to the important issues of our lives. Some say, "when I am able to get ahead at work, I will spend more time with my family." Or "when I get some spare time in my life, I plan to become involved in the local community." Or "when things settle down, I want to give some time to my church."

In some countries of the world, for example North Korea or the Sudan, where persecution of Christians is dominant people put their very lives at risk by being a Christian disciple. There are no uncommitted believers there. And yet in our society, we are able to be a 'Christian' and not worry about being committed. The call that Jesus gave was a call to follow Him. It was never a plea to make some kind of momentary decision to get forgiveness, peace and heaven and then go on living any way you want to.

Jesus calls, "Come and follow me..." to the crowds that attended his caravan into Jerusalem, and to you, me and others that attend the churches of our time. Understanding discipleship is to hear the call and make the commitment. Jesus' response to legitimate requests to postpone the journey reminds Christians in every generation that there are always justifiable excuses to defer the journey or put off the claims of discipleship. Other important matters compete for our attention. Jesus

needs disciples today, this very hour. Next week will be too late for some. Next year will never come for many. Jesus compels us to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is our Christian vocation and must be our first priority.

To understand discipleship is also to understand that there is a cost to discipleship. When we say, "I will follow you wherever you go," - as we do in confirmation or in other forms of commitment to Christ - we may be somewhat like that person in the crowd who was excited to follow Jesus, but had not thought through the cost.

Discipleship means giving up everything that is contrary to the will and the ways of Christ and embracing his message and ministry. You might ask yourself the question, "What is my Christian faith costing me?" If the answer is, "Nothing," then we may be sure that whatever else we may be practicing – it's not discipleship in any New Testament sense.

Within our church we have numerous people who give of their time and talents. For example, members of the choir or music group, church wardens, members of committees, volunteers who do jobs in the church and the grounds. For these individuals, their time must come at a cost to themselves and, perhaps, their relationships. So, being a disciple of Jesus might affect a person's closest relationships, and by implication all his or her other relationships as well. For example, a marriage might come under strain, if one partner is not a Christian. If a Christian is not yet married, then his or her faith might have a major impact on whom they eventually marry. Other relationships, such as at work or with friends might also be difficult.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, 'The Cost of Discipleship,' is an excellent essay on what it means to be true followers of Jesus. The section on cheap grace and costly grace is of particular importance. Bonhoeffer defines cheap grace as the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. He sees preachers preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance and disciples proclaiming to follow Jesus without a willingness to take up their cross. Bonhoeffer's life became a living mirror of costly grace. He was arrested for helping some Jews escape Nazi Germany and later implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was hanged just three days before the Allied forces arrived. Bonhoeffer was willing to take up his cross and follow Jesus, no matter the cost. We have to ask ourselves, are we trying to follow Jesus and become like Him? Unless we do, it cannot be said that we are His disciples.

Is Jesus too hard on us when he wants this kind of commitment? Do you remember when Jesus said: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all the other things (you need) will be given to you." So we must put Jesus first and foremost, above all other priorities in our life.

When you think about it, the cost of discipleship is totally reasonable in light of the gift we've been given! In 1Peter Chapter 1 it says, "You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ". Simply put, we were "bought at a price; therefore we should glorify God in body and in spirit, which are God's"

The miracle for all of us is that Jesus still comes to us. He accepts us just as we are and calls us to be all that God would have us be. Our responsibility is to stop making excuses, to stop running away to hide and to become disciples." Amen