

**The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 18)
St Thomas', Salisbury, 2022**

Deuteronomy 30:15-end

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Until about lunchtime on Friday I was going to preach a very different sermon this morning, because I got very captivated by the tiny letter to Philemon, pretty much all of which we heard as our second reading this morning. I will still refer to it a bit, but there is loads in there that we will pass over right now. But do go home and read the whole letter. It stands out in the New Testament as being one of the few bits of writing addressed to an individual rather than a group or church. And it is really very personal. And I might preach that sermon in three years' time if the rector is still talking to me, when the readings come around again.

And then Thursday evening I spent some time online with my Cell group, a little collection of seven of us who trained together 20 years ago, and we were reading the Gospel for today. We were reading a verse each, all of us using our own preferred Bible translation, and something really stuck out to me. Let me just read you again verse 31 of the gospel we have just heard: "or what King, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand." It's a tricky passage isn't it, and it's hard not to hear it with the war in Ukraine very much present in our consciousness. Then one of my friends, Sarah, read that verse

from her Bible translation and it said this: "what will a king do if he has only 10,000 soldiers to defend himself against a king who is about to attack him with 20,000?" In her Bible the editors have chosen to reverse the motivations of the two kingdoms, so that the king that Jesus is likening us to is defending his territory from an aggressor, rather than being the king who is going out to wage war. The other six of us had Bibles that basically said what we heard this morning, but Sarah's, presumably in an attempt to make the Scripture read in a slightly more comfortable way completely reverses the point that Jesus is making. Scripture has been edited to make it more palatable.

And there's another sermon here about whether we have the right to do that to the Scripture, and what we do more generally with bits of the Bible that we don't much like. But again this isn't that sermon. Maybe someone will preach that one on Bible Sunday.

This is a tricky gospel. It's not one that makes for comfortable reading, and I'm willing to bet it's not in many of our top-10 stories of Jesus. But at the heart of it there is something really important being said, which actually is completely evacuated of its power if you do what Sarah's Bible translators did and edit out the uncomfortable bit.

Jesus is saying to the crowds that are following him, if you really want to do this, you need to understand that this is going to be difficult. Discipleship, he says, and that's the word he uses three times in this passage, discipleship - if you want to be my disciple - someone who follows me - is like hating your family. It is like carrying an instrument of execution. It is like a building project. It is like waging a war. It is like having nothing.

Gosh.

Now Luke, whose gospel we are reading this year, often exaggerates for effect, and so that goes some way to explaining this passage, which is certainly atypical for the sort of language that Jesus uses elsewhere. But even if we build that in, unless we want to be like Sarah's Bible and actually completely change the story, what are we to make of these quite startling metaphors?

We are to receive, I think, the message that we need to take this seriously. That the Christian way, the life of a believer in Jesus Christ, is not straightforward, simple or easy. And actually that is very Jesus isn't it? In other places he talks about entering through the narrow gate. We are not being instructed to hate our families, or indeed to wage wars. We are, however, being told very honestly by our Lord that there are implications to following him. This is a choice, and the choice comes with consequences. Our Old Testament reading is very clear about that isn't it: I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.

I have in my mind Jesus turning around and seeing this great crowd following him, and sort of giving them fair warning that he isn't just the next gimmick. This isn't something you can do for a bit until something shinier comes along. I sort of hear Christ saying to me, "if you're going to do this, Tom, you need to put your big boy pants on."

Following me is like building a tower. Following me is like waging a war. You need to think quite hard about whether this is realistic. And if it isn't, get out now. I guess Jesus is kind of giving this crowd a lifeboat.

And as striking and uncomfortable as some of this language is, actually they are very familiar words to the Christian. If you

hang around over coffee long enough you might catch the beginning of Poppy's baptism. And all this kind of language is right there in the baptism service.

You will have worked out by now that I really only have one sermon, and it is about the font. The congregation around the font will say to Poppy just before she is baptised, "fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world, and the devil." There is a battle to be waged here, but it is not a selfish, bullying war between human beings. It is a battle against the darkness. A standing up against evil, against injustice, against the besetting sin of pride - or selfishness - in all its forms. Are you ready to wage that battle? And how might you be being called to do that where you are? Where God has placed you?

And the letter to Philemon reminds us that this is actually very personal. Just as Paul is concerned for the well-being of his colleague, stormy though their relationship has been, just so is God concerned for us. Paul refers to his heart three times in 21 verses. And reconciliation is always the aim. Always possible.

And all of that of course because, if we look at the gospel reading symbolically, it is Christ who is building the tower. The tower of the cross. The place where love is revealed. And it is Christ who is going to war: to war against the darkness, to war that takes him right through the gates of death and out into resurrection light. And Christ's tower is so firm, and Christ's war so completely won, that we respond by following.

Discipleship is always a response to a gift. Our life of faith is all response. The rule of St Benedict begins with the words, "listen, my child, to your father's instruction." Listen, and then act. If I am to be part of Christ's endeavour, what am I called to do?