

Worship Together 31 January 2010

Stewardship I – Luke 14:25-35: “Two junctions”

I don't know if we're all familiar with Alice through the looking glass
but there's a conversation between Alice and the white Queen
at one point where Alice laughs and says something like
“There's no use trying, one can't believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven't had much practice,” replied the Queen.
“When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day.
Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things
... before breakfast.”

There are a few things I'd like to believe - before or after breakfast
which are, in fact, impossible

I'd like to believe Aston Villa were consistent enough
to win the premiership one year

I'd like to believe that one day Jay will treat me with respect

On a more serious note, another thing I would like to believe is that
I could create a desire for God in people's hearts
and that there would a positive response to that desire

It's something I might want - but it's impossible
it's impossible because
only God can put a desire like that in us, planted like a seed in us
only you can respond for yourself
(and only I can respond for myself)

I might try - I might use my powers of persuasion using clever arguments
I might try to manipulate you in some way, backing you into a corner
I might try to plead with you
and I might even have a tear in my eye as I did so

None of these would work in the long term
only God can create a desire for him and draw us to himself
and we can only respond for ourselves

Why this beginning? because today (and over the next few weeks)
I'm talking about stewardship
about how we use our money in a godly way
and it's a subject we're sometimes reluctant to engage with

And so, as we set out on this what I hope will be a journey together
I have prayed that the Lord sweeps through this place
by his Spirit
to create in us a desire to follow Jesus wholeheartedly
I have prayed that whatever seeds the Lord wants to plant in us
... will find fertile soil

In setting out on this journey
I want to start with what at first sight
... seems to be an outrageous piece of Scripture

Turn, would you, to Luke chapter 14
I'll come to the money side of things in a moment
but we'll begin by looking at the heart, at what motivates us

Chapter 14
** READ verses 25-26

Do you see what I mean by outrageous?
can this be right
“Hate your parents? Hate even yourself?”

Well, Jesus can't possibly mean this literally
after all, he told us to love our enemies
so what does he mean?

I was recalling with Sheila a time back in the 1980s - in Reading
when the church we were in was going through first wave of renewal

God was really stirring things up, changing what we did
the kind of stuff that we take for granted now - but was radical then
we didn't know where it would stop

I recall coming back late from a meeting one night
and we were lying in bed talking about what I'd experienced
and how I felt we needed to go further with God
it was exciting but also scary

Sheila could see I was really being affected by what God was doing
and that he had a call on my life
she asked whether this would separate us
would my love for her grow cold as my love for God increased?

A good question - my reply then, as it would be now,
is that God isn't in the business of separating married couples
Rather love for him would transform our love for one another

Then Sheila reminded me of an incident soon after this
the kids were having their breakfast
it was just Peter and Daniel in those days

Sheila was in the kitchen
when out of the blue she had an overwhelming experience
... of God's presence and of his love

She knew at that instant that she could do anything God asked
she knew she would have walked out of the house and left the kids
... if God had asked her
it was a moment of complete trust and abandonment

And no - God didn't ask her to walk out of the house
just as he didn't ask Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac
but it changed the situation radically

It's interesting that after that Sheila found that her love for the kids grew
especially towards the more difficult of the two

This is why Jesus said - put me first
not so we would neglect our families
not so we leave them
but so we can love more

We can trust Jesus when he says follow me because he is good
we can trust Jesus because he gives us life
we can trust Jesus because he
brings purpose, fulfilment and fruitfulness to our lives

Are you ready for another outrageous verse?

Read 14:27

I've called these outrageous verses
because that's how they might appear at first
but when you dig down
it's not that they're outrageous
rather, by couching it in such stark terms
that you just can't ignore his words; you have to react
Jesus is saying - make a decision on this

And it's the same with this verse

A disciple isn't meant to be someone who turns up when it suits them
a disciple is someone who dies
that's what it means to carry a cross
to die to oneself

When Jesus invites us to join him, carrying our cross
it's a one-way journey of self-denial
surrendering what we have for what he has
the paradox at the heart of the gospel
... is that we have to give up our life to receive his life

Two illustrations clarify this further

** Read 14:28-33

First, the building of the tower ...

Sometimes you see people who have bought an rust-bucket of a classic car
as a project, so they can do it up
but when they see how much it will cost, how long it will take
how much effort is involved
the car just sits on the drive

So Jesus is asking - can you afford to follow me - work it out and decide
to be a disciple does entail a personal cost
because it's an invitation to a lifestyle not a hobby

Can we afford to follow him?
Hold onto that thought for a moment
because the next illustration makes a rather different point

Imagine you're a king with an army, Jesus says
you're about to be invaded, attacked, by another king
but this king has a much larger army than yours
do you have the resources to defeat that king?
Can you afford to resist
If not - you're better off negotiating terms

This is Jesus putting the situation the other way round
in effect - he's asking - can you afford NOT to follow me?

Not only is there a cost to discipleship, to following Jesus
there's a cost to non-discipleship, to NOT following him

We pay a big price when we choose to go our own way; we lose so much

On Wednesday, I went down to the C of E school to take an assembly
my subject was the pearl of great price

Let me remind you of the story from Mt 13 - it's very brief
it's about a merchant who deals in precious gems, that kind of thing
and one day he discovers a fantastic pearl

This pearl is huge

he holds it up to the light - it's perfectly shaped
it's colour is perfect
it's the best he's ever seen, and is likely to see

He has to have it; he has to possess it
but it's so costly that he has to sell everything he has
to buy it and to make it his own

As I was preparing the assembly
the words came into my mind as a prayer
"You are my pearl of great price"
(I tried to compose a song there and then - except I'm no good ...
if anyone wants to make a song out of it that'd be great)

You are my pearl of great price; you're my treasure in the field

Being a follower of Jesus may cost all we have
but we get the pearl, the treasure, in return

Listen to these words of Bill Johnson ...

"The quest for His face"
by that he means seeking God and his will with all you've got

"The quest for His face is the ultimate quest. But to embrace the quest for
the face of God, one must be ready to die. Thus this quest is not a journey for
the faint of heart. It is far too costly to pursue from mere curiosity.

Still I hesitate to warn of the cost of fully seeking his face – not because a price
doesn't exist; it costs everything. I hesitate because the reality is that what a
person gets in return makes the price we pay embarrassingly small by
comparison.

The bottom line is that we give all of ourselves to obtain all of Him. There's
never been a better deal."

[insert salt???

It's true to say that we don't ever fully pay the price
we never fully surrender in this life - it's more of a process
we may move on in our faith journey towards that goal
this life being training ground for the next,
when there will be complete surrender

But as I look round our church
I am moved by those who are committing themselves to God
I see many on that journey of following their call

We hear this week by week in the WOW moments
how people here have the experience of what it means
... to possess that precious pearl
the experience of getting to participate in the life of Jesus
the experience of being involved in redeeming lives for him

We see this happening
we're on that journey

New things are being birthed
reaching older people; reaching younger people
reaching homeless people
reaching pub people
reaching Rainbow people, and so on

New ways of reaching out are emerging
which God is placing on people's hearts

Things are happening

There's an envelope in the foyer for everyone
some will have picked it up already
if there isn't one with your name on
don't worry, there are some without names
you're probably not on the database yet
just take one of the spares
whatever the case, please make sure you get one

If you look at the contents
inside the letter from me
the first leaflet you come across is one titled
"stewardship - time to decide"

On the front is a picture of a road sign
similar to one you might find on a motorway
one arrow points straight on
the other points back on itself
indicating a u-turn

When on spiritual journeys we come to decisions
we come to a kind of junction, as it were
decisions whether to pay the price and trust God and go straight on
or to do a U-turn and stick with what is familiar and comfortable

We all take these decisions all the time - big and small
whether we're new believers, just setting out
whether we're still exploring Christianity
whether we're old lags who've been hanging round churches for ages
we may be at different points personally,
but we're travelling together, making decisions

When we choose to trust God and follow him
in my experience, we don't always know what is going to happen

When I was out in California last October with Ron and my sister
we had some spare time, so we decided to drive north up the I5
towards Mount Shasta - mountain over 14000 feet high - amazing

We knew it was a quite a distance, but we wanted to get closer to it
we knew we had to get back, but we kept going a bit further
to the next junction, and then to the next - let's go one more

Suddenly, we came across Castle Crags
a massive chunk of bare granite, grey rock, with a jagged top
there it was rising up almost vertically hundreds/thousands of feet

It was stunningly beautiful - and completely unexpected
We didn't know it was there
but because we'd pressed on with our journey
because we hadn't turned back
we witnessed this amazing natural phenomenon

It can be like that with God
when we press on with him
sometimes unexpectedly he will stagger us with his beauty

Church - we must press on
I believe we must not do a u-turn now
we must go forward together

Has the Lord, perhaps, planted that seed of desire in you
do you want this?

Hold on - there's a second question, a second junction, a second decision

This sermon is called "TWO junctions" for a reason

We have a decision to make about stewardship
about our money, our giving to the church

You need to know the situation is critical
and I'm not exaggerating
let me give a practical illustration of what I mean

I'm on the Missions Team
one of the tasks of that team is to recommend to the PCC
how to allocate the church's giving

Our church is committed to giving away a tenth, a tithe, of its income
each year to various charities and organisations

In 2006, we had £12,500 to give away
in 2009, this had gone down to £10,000

Over four years, that's a decline of 20%
(or 25%, depending on how you look at it)

That's a concrete indicator of how the giving has been going in this church
those we support in Africa, for example, are having to cope
with a major decrease in funding

This is true across the board
we're finding ourselves becoming more and more limited
more and more constrained in what we can do

We employ Levy, Karen and Pam
how are we going to continue that?

It's not just the economy - two of those years were during the boom times

The truth is: we've not been keeping up
and it's got the stage where, borrowing the motorway analogy,
we're not just struggling to pay for the fuel for what lies ahead
we're struggling to pay for the fuel now

And so we have this second decision
is it going to be straight on - trusting in God
or is it turning back?

As I see it, our giving has got to match our calling
we can't let it lag way behind
our heart for God has to extend right into our wallets and purses

As a church we have got to address this now
we've got to address it with some urgency
we've got to address it with a massive generosity of spirit

That's why we're launching a stewardship campaign today
and it's why I and the PCC and the stewardship team
are looking for and praying for a really substantial increase.
And I mean substantial - not just the loose change in our pockets

We need to make up the difference on the shortfall of previous years
and to add to that for future mission and ministry

When we come to the practicalities
when we look into all the considerations and issues involved
the situation is really very complex

There are all kinds of questions that are going to arise quite naturally

What does it mean for me to be generous?
What does tithing, giving a tenth, mean?
What if I have limited resources?
How can we support those who are struggling?
How can we do all this without a sense of guilt?
What if I'm new to the church
you're asking me to give and I'm barely through the door!

There are loads of questions - quite rightly so
and so we're going to take some time trying to answer them

What I want to say today is this
I want two things to happen
things, as I said at the start - are impossible for me to do

I want the Lord to plant a seed of desire in each of us
a seed of desire which says - I want to follow his call on my life
I want more of his life by giving up more of mine
Lord, I want to trust for the journey ahead
a journey with no U-turns

Ephesians 4:1 says,
"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

The other impossible for me thing to do is to force anyone
into a positive, whole-hearted, generous response
I can't force you, but I can ask you to take this seriously

The envelopes are out there, if you've not picked them up
I urge you - read what's there carefully
pray, and pray, and pray
let God speak through the words
seek his will
discuss it with others

There's a booklet describing the situation
one outlining what we believe is a godly way of treating money
and there's one with some forms to fill in to return to the office here

You're invited to fill in a pledge form
you might want to do that today
but it may be better not filling them in immediately
not until you've heard the sermon series

Copies of these will be downloadable from our website
you can get a memory stick
a printed version
there's no need to miss any of them
you can go over the teaching again if you need to

Our small groups will be also having a number of session in this
bring the issues into the open and discuss them

If there are questions you need answering
then ask me
or you can ask Peter Viney, who is charge of stewardship
or Charles Thompson, the Treasurer

This is too important a matter
too pressing a matter to treat lightly

Let us pray