

The 12th Sunday after Trinity, Year C, 2022
Luke 14.25-33; Deuteronomy 30.15-20

The other day in Hamburg I was travelling on one of the city trains making my way to the airport there. A man in his mid-twenties caught my attention. His attire was a mix of what would have formerly been tennis attire and more formal wear. What struck me was that each item he was wearing was a well known upmarket label. His shoes were from Lacoste best known in my younger days for the polo shirts with the Lacoste logo of an alligator or is it a crocodile. Well it's a crocodile, supposedly because the French designer René Lacoste was nicknamed 'Le Crocodile' (The Crocodile). Today it is difficult to find clothes that aren't labelled for the world to see what you are wearing. The message is ambiguous ranging from I belong! I don't belong! I want to belong! to It was on sale!

I was reminded of this man and his labelled outfit, each item with a different logo except for the shoes, which were both Lacoste, because of what Jesus says to the large crowds that are following him in today's gospel. 'None of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.' As we used to jokingly comment in the 80s, there were even jute bags to be purchased that were inscribed, 'I shop, therefore I am', which is a spoof on René Descartes 'Cogito, ergo sum,...' (I think, therefore I am.).

This is a troubling passage for most of us who hear it, if not for all of us. Do we take this at face value? Is it hyperbole? Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement or claim not meant to be taken literally. The passage makes us think. It makes us feel and consider. I tend to the more literal reading so that the saying does not lose its force. So that I am a little shaken even now after over four decades of seeking to be a disciple. Not nicely fitting the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. I still have an awfully long way to travel to become a disciple. I am pleased that Jesus in today's gospel speaks about becoming a disciple and thereby indicating it is a process. We are forever becoming disciples. We are those who follow. Those who even in our middle age and old age are seeking to follow however falteringly.

As already indicated I find this passage challenging and it is very challenging for those who are supportive of and stand by the concept of democracy, because one of the achievements besides the right to vote of each and every individual of a certain age, alongside an impartial judiciary, is the protection and guarantee of property rights. This guarantee brings us stability an essential element of a democracy. It helped at least initially to broaden wealth, creating a middle class that people can aspire to. What Boris Johnson calls 'levelling up', but which he said against the backdrop of our time in which wealth is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, as people have learnt to navigate the system and are constantly pressuring lawmakers to liberalise the laws for further wealth accumulation. I like to quip, 'You can never have enough money.'

It may surprise some but what initially gave the Christian church a visible presence in the Roman Empire was the right granted by the Edict of Milan to Christians to own property, to become proprietors mainly in terms of Christian temples, churches. The Edict of Milan was in 313 AD and so the fourth century saw a flourishing of buildings indicating just how strong the Church already was. Think of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem (327 AD), Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome (circa 340 AD) or the Cathedral of the Armenian Church in Etchmiadzin (301 AD).

It is in Luke's second book, The Acts of the Apostles that we read and are inspired by the early Christian community in Jerusalem. There we read famously,

'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.' (Acts 2:44-47)

In the next chapter of the Book of Acts we meet Ananias and Sapphira, married members of the church in Jerusalem, who sold a field and gave the proceeds to the church in Jerusalem, but held some back for themselves. Confronted by Peter they lie to him saying that they had handed over all the proceeds. For this lie they are struck down. I remember reading about Ananias and Sapphira and thinking this does not fit well at all with my image of God. Even today it does not fit well. And so what to do? There are two things I take from this passage. First, where are we holding back in our discipleship as Ananias and Sapphira did? Second, what we must not lose sight of is that sharing things in common is central to any Christian community and that we must be giving attention to it with a seriousness asked of those who would want to be disciples. Who would want to follow and become.

During my break I was asked by a sincere Christian trying to navigate various responsibilities about giving to the church. My answer was blunt. The church is a business and like any other business it needs to make money and depending on the money it makes (raises if you feel more comfortable) its ministry will be expansive, middling, small, negligent. Anyone who is troubled by the notion of the church as a business should call to mind the headlines, not so few of them, that have highlighted the unbusinesslike management of church funds. Stewardship campaigns are often about how to share the burden. How to ask for money from people who are reluctant or unwilling rather than a giving that is driven and motored by the love of God and what God has made known and is doing for us through Jesus Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

The point in relation to what I am saying is that one place we see our discipleship coming alive - in our becoming disciples - is in our giving and in our common treasure, for this building that technically belongs to the Bishop of London is our possession. It belongs to an office, which is inhabited by a person responsible for legal rights ensuring property rights. But is also seen in our funding of various positions in the church and admittedly primarily that of the chaplain, whoever she or he is. The maintenance of this building and our other possessions and dwellings is our common responsibility. Yes, the church has possessions. Yes, we have possessions. No one is suggesting that we sell them, unless we were failing our mission, our ministry, and our purpose and so it is important that all of us are as clear as we can be about what our purpose is, our mission is, our ministry is. I refer you to our Mission Statement, which you can find on the internet, or email me and I will send you a copy. Part of our mission is about learning about and becoming good stewards of all that God has entrusted to us, including God's creation and because this is the case, we observe Creationtide reminding ourselves in the beautiful words of King David found in the First Book of Chronicles.

Then David blessed the Lord in the presence of all the assembly; David said: 'Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, for ever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name. 1 Chronicles 29:10-13

This pronouncement that we can only become his disciples if we give up all our possessions is embedded in and follows on from two other startling statements, which does put discipleship beyond our attainment. It becoming a possession along other possessions. Discipleship is not something we own. It is something we are invited into. None of us are super heroes or have given up the illusion of becoming one, even if we were once enamoured with Batman and Superman, who have evolved overtime into more nuanced and fragile heroes... The two statements are about hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes even life itself and without this detachment we cannot be his disciples. Jesus follows this statement with giving the cross the central place. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow cannot be my disciple.

In these three startling and disturbing statements Jesus is asking us to see life differently from the man I observed while on a train in Hamburg whose heart I could not look on. King David's words are a good guide. He captures well what this new life Jesus is inviting us into looks like. It is the life of the people of Israel, but now lived in Christ Jesus. In all things God first. Pinch yourself from time to time. Your identity is not to be found in your possessions, even though people do find their sense of identity and belonging in their possessions and in their wealth. It is not about family before all else, but family within the love of God and the Church (capital C), lived in the local Christian community, which we are to serve and be a part of. Even life that great treasure is not an end in itself as the invitation to take up our cross states. Life is a precious gift that we are to fill with meaning in the service of God and our neighbour and – as the reading from the Book of Deuteronomy reminds us – by loving God, walking in his ways, and observing his decrees, observances and ordinances.

There is much to consider in the light of today's gospel and how we can make sense of it. It is challenging. It remains challenging. It has not lost any of its force. May God speak to you through today's gospel. So be it. **Amen.**