

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **PRIORITIES THAT CHANGE LIVES**

**4<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33

So, when the passage from Luke's gospel was read out what did you make of it? What did you think of that terrible statement about hating your parents? Did it get your attention? It got mine! It got mine as a daughter and as a parent. As a daughter I hope, and now that I cannot undo anything I did, I really hope that I did not hate my parents (though every teenager has his or her moments!) but fulfilled the command to honour my father and my mother. As a parent I hope my children do not and will not hate me (though every teenager has his or her moments!) but will also fulfil the command to honour their father and particularly their mother! So, yes, it got my attention.

Family is important in our culture, but in fact not nearly so important, so taboo as it was in Jesus' society. Parents there were part of the family circle even when their children were grown and married, and they still expected to be obeyed unquestioningly. Time enough for the next generation to make decisions and have their own way when the parents were gone.

Jesus knew this and knew that if he were to talk about hating parents, if he used this arresting language he would get people's attention. And then he might be able to get home to people then and people now the extent of the commitment he was and is looking for from his followers. That is why he goes on to talk about not starting an enterprise without first counting the cost.

People who complain that being a Christian is hard, and sound surprised, have obviously never considered these words of Jesus. Yes, at other times he said that he if we come to him he will give us rest – though even then he said that we would have to take his yoke upon us. Yes, at other times he told us not to worry, because our heavenly Father knows and will supply all our needs, that we are more precious than the birds of the air or the flowers of the field. But he also said this. He also said that we must expect to have to hate – or to be accused of hating our parents, or certainly to take seriously that parents and their approval, or family in the wider sense will no longer be the priority, will no longer be the ones who shape our lives.

Jesus' warning to his would-be followers is pretty strong. You might wonder if he wanted them to follow him at all. No politician who wanted your vote would talk like this – that voting for him or her would mean turning from family, would mean giving up all your possessions. No one would vote for them if they did.

But then Jesus wasn't a politician, and he wasn't seeking a vote. He was more like the leader of an expedition looking for suitable people to accompany him on a long and dangerous trek. There will be excitement, it will be worth doing, it is certainly an adventure, but he only wants those who can last the distance, who know that it is dangerous, that when you set off there is no turning back, and who knows what might happen at home in your absence. You may see wonders and marvels, but there may also be discomforts. So you have to count the cost before you set out.

Philemon had to count the cost as well. He, a well-to-do person, had set out to follow Jesus, and now Paul is bringing him up against the realities of what that might cost in terms of money, and social prestige, in terms of the way he had to change his thinking and his living. If you have to be prepared to even hate your parents, you should know that there is another family, the family of God. And Paul wants Philemon to know that being part of the Christian family trumps all other ties, except the tie to God himself. Following God trumps social roles, trumps family, trumps possessions. Nothing is as important to the Christian than the relationships with others which we have as mutual children of God. Paul made clear to Philemon the practical out working of that in his world.

Philemon, you see, like most other well-off men in the Roman empire had slaves to work for him. We do not know if he were a good master or a harsh one, but at some point he became a Christian. This did not mean that he set all his slaves free. Perhaps he was a harsh master, or perhaps his slave Onesimus just didn't want to be a slave of even a good master, but certainly somehow the opportunity presented itself to Onesimus, and he ran away. He ran to Rome, because it is always easier to disappear in a crowd than in more sparsely populated areas, and in Rome he might find employment. What he did find, somehow, was the imprisoned Paul. We know that Paul was allowed visitors, so maybe one of his friends brought Onesimus. Maybe Onesimus had met Paul before or heard of him, because obviously he knew Philemon, but we don't know. But he met Paul, and Paul told him about Jesus and Onesimus became a Christian.

He was a Christian runaway slave. Nowadays we might think that the Christian thing for Paul and his friends to do would be to conceal Onesimus, but the early church did not take on the moral issue of slavery. Maybe they did not even see it as a moral issue, so used was their society to having slavery as a vital part of the social fabric. There are issues which it takes years and centuries of meditation upon the Christian truths of God's love for everyone before we can see wrongs which need to be righted. And every time it is a struggle.

So Paul did not think about concealing Onesimus, or even letting him go on his own way. He belonged to Philemon. To run away was in fact to rob his master. And so Paul persuaded Onesimus to go back. He must have been quite a persuader! But there is more persuading to be done. A runaway slave who was caught – and Rome forbade the harbouring of runaways - could be whipped, burned with iron, or killed. What would Philemon do?

Paul didn't know, but he was taking no chances. He wrote our letter and in it points out to Philemon that he feels able to ask him for a favour because he was the one who told Philemon the good news of Jesus which has changed his life. But now it has also changed Onesimus' life as well, and that means that the two of them, while still master and slave in the economics of the world, were really brothers in the eternal economy of

God's kingdom. Paul hints that if Philemon wants to send Onesimus back to Paul, he will be more than glad to have him, but what he asks is that Philemon welcome his slave as he would Paul himself. The connection which they now have as sons of God through Jesus more than trumps any other consideration.

But we don't have slaves, so what might the practical outworking of counting the cost of following Jesus look like to us? Where might the fact that we are children of God need to make an impact on our lives?

In the context of a village church, we meet and worship with people who we meet and have met in different contexts in the rest of our lives. This is different in city congregations, where you may only meet church folk in church circles, and never see them in the rest of life. Some of you here have known each other for decades, not just years, and in those long years you cannot have seen just the good in each other, good as you all are. In a small community, there can be neighbourly disputes and disagreements, we can hold strongly differing views about the direction our community is taking, or we can find it hard to let go of triumphs or disappointments in the past. One of the things I have been glad about here, is that I have seen very little sign of that spilling into the church. If some of you are not speaking to others, I am not aware of it. I hope you are not going to fill me in on a lot of stuff I have failed to pick up on after the service!

Of course, sometimes we do not fall out with someone we disagree with simply because we do not think the other person is worth the effort of fighting with. That is not what Jesus is talking about to the crowds. He is not saying that we should not care about things. He is saying that we should come after him, and put belonging to him first of all, high above all other priorities in our lives; and Paul is taking about and showing Philemon that this will have consequences for the way we live with other believers. Philemon was probably not feeling indifferent about Onesimus. Philemon is quite probably furious with his fun away slave. Who has been doing his work since he has gone? What is Philemon's return on the investment in Onesimus that he has made? But Paul asks him to forgive his slave because Onesimus is also now his brother.

In the same way it should not be indifference that keeps us from fighting with our brothers and sisters in church. It should be love. And that love should be so deep and real that in fact we are able to fight a bit, now and then when we disagree, knowing that what exists between us will not be hurt by a little disagreement. Just as birth brothers and sisters, if they have a close relationship, can disagree without loving any the less, so we in the church should be able to as well.

When we meet around the table today, we come as God's children, each one of us, called and loved by our Heavenly Father, and called not only to him, but also through our relationship with him, called to each other. Jesus once said that if people had anything against their brothers or sisters they should settle it before they brought their gifts to the altar. We are not bringing our sacrifices, but coming to remember Jesus' sacrifice for us, still, the principle is the same. When we pass the peace before we take the elements, may we do so forgiving each other and celebrating the bond which we have as children of God. For if we follow Jesus, then for each of us that is what is of paramount importance in our lives. Amen.