

**Laggan and Newtonmore  
Parish Church of Scotland**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Jesus the Challenger Part 4**

**17th Feb 2019**

Luke 14:25-35

Luke 18:18-30

If you go to Oban, then the one feature apart from the harbour, which you cannot miss is McCaig's tower, also known as McCaig's folly. It sits above the town, a colosseum-like structure, drawing the eye to it. It was built at the end of the nineteenth century by a local banker, with the idea of giving work to local masons, and of providing a lasting memorial to his family. But it is a folly. It is a building that has no real purpose, and which is incomplete. Mr McCaig ran out of money before he could build the actual tower which was supposed to be inside the encircling walls. And where there are niches for statues, these remain empty and the images of the McCaig family which were to fill them were never carved. Like the person in Jesus' illustration, Mr McCaig began to build and was not able to finish.

Other follies in Scotland include the well-known temple-like structure on the top of Edinburgh's Calton hill: just a row of columns, never completed. It was begun in 1826 and was intended to be a complete Parthenon, since at this time Edinburgh was known as the Athens of the north. This Parthenon was intended as a memorial to Scots soldiers killed in the Napoleonic wars. Lack of money halted the building in 1829. We get used to these things being part of the landscape, and we forget that when they were planned there was a larger purpose in mind, but so it was. And Jesus has such things in mind when he called on people who wanted to follow him to count the cost, because it would cost everything they had.

Up until now when we have been looking at the challenges Jesus gave, we have looked at those given specifically to Jesus' disciples, those who were in the training programme to take his work forward. Today we hear him giving a challenge, a really, really tough challenge to the crowds which followed after him. He says "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple.” If nothing else that Jesus says makes you sit up and wonder, then surely this should.

Of course, none of us loves the members of our families perfectly, but to be told that you should hate them, in comparison to the importance you put on following Jesus? That’s tough. It is designed to make you think, to make everyone think. This challenge, you see, is for all who would be disciples. It is not just given to the twelve, who have already left their homes and families and livelihoods, but to the crowds who came after Jesus. Jesus never courted the crowds. He never went out of his way to give them what they wanted to hear, and he knew that because he showed the life of the kingdom of God by being generous with healing and feeding and other signs of God’s love, there would be many who came after him for what they could get, and not out of the desire to live his way and come to God through him.

So he throws out this challenge, and it is a big ask. What Jesus is talking about is a whole-life commitment, not just in terms of length of days but in terms of what we put into our days. And Jesus gave this challenge to the crowds because he knew that most of them would not really want to make such a commitment. Very often in the history of our faith, there have been those who made a real commitment to Jesus and there has been a crowd of hangers on. In our own country, when in years past the church was more crowded, how many people who turned up on a Sunday were making a whole life commitment to living Jesus’ radical way of love? And how was the reputation of the church damaged by those who seemed to be part of it but didn’t live Jesus’ way?

If you want to be a real disciple, you do have to count the cost.

The measuring staff of commitment that Jesus holds up here is one against which we will always fail – to hate parents and children. To hate them? It is not how we were created. We were created to love one another, and this is why these words jar on us. Jesus knew this, of course. He knew about families, who love and annoy but who are bound together with ties which are really hard to break. And he talked of our relationship with God as being a family tie. And yet he said that no one could be a disciple if we did not hate our families. Maybe he did it for effect. Maybe he wanted us to know that we have never arrived, that we can never sit back and say that we have made all the commitment that is needed, for when we do that, we can grow complacent and our commitment to and concentration on following Jesus can slip.

Usually when we read Scripture in our services, week by week, we have two passages from different parts of the Bible. Often it is an Old Testament and a New Testament reading. But today I chose for us to read two parts of this Gospel that Luke wrote. And I did it because I wanted you not only to hear what Jesus said to the crowd about commitment, but what he said to his disciples. Later on Jesus

makes a similar challenge to the crowds who saw his interaction with the ruler who wanted to follow him. He is told to sell everything, and give the money away and then follow Jesus, and he finds it too hard. Just as before, Jesus is asking for everything, including what and who we love and including what and who we think gives us security. Count the cost, because following Jesus will ask everything of you.

But then, Peter – it's always Peter, isn't it? – says to him “Well, we have done that. We have left everything to follow you.” And Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

For those who have counted the cost and been prepared to put everything in God's hands, there is – what shall we call it? Reward? Blessing? Benefit? There is a giving that is beyond what we can measure. When we give everything into God's hands so that we may follow him, so that we may be part of the body of those who seek to bring in God's kingdom here on earth, living with his love and justice and generosity, then we know such blessing from God. We know peace when we might be troubled, we know security when earthly means of support seem gone, we know joy in sadness and love as great as any family bond – from God and from those who seek his kingdom with us.

Jesus does not hold out this hope of blessing to the crowds, because he doesn't want people to follow him just for what they hope to get out of it: what kind of followers are these? We would call it cupboard love! But he offers this blessing to those who have already made the commitment – to the disciples who have literally turned their backs on their former lives and loves and securities – Jesus makes his promise, knowing that in their camaraderie with each other and with him they have already begun to receive it.

You do have to count the cost. You have to know that following Jesus will cost you everything, and be prepared for that, if you do not want to find that more is asked of you than you are prepared to give. The world is littered with those who have fallen away from the path of discipleship because after a while they found it too hard. They are witness to their own lack of commitment just as physical follies stand lasting witness to someone who did not count the cost correctly.

You do have to count the cost, remembering that Jesus' call to repent was a call to turn around and live differently, differently from your old way and differently from the way that the world lives: with different values and priorities. That was the point Jesus was making when he talked of hating your family. You are to live differently and not even the sacred ties of family should be more important than following him.

But although it sounds hard, and although we will never achieve the perfect commitment asked of us, for those who have made that commitment, who are inside the body of disciples who are asked to take forward Jesus' message and ministry, to live in and bring

in the kingdom of God in word and deed and attitude, there is unimaginable blessing. It is unimaginable, because very often to those who have not committed themselves, it is invisible. How can you show the peace of heart and mind that following Christ gives? How can you show the security we have in him or the wonder of knowing that God loves you?

Count the cost. But don't forget all that God gives to those who follow his Son. Amen.