



Diocese of Winchester

Preach **Luke** sermon

Proper 18 9th September 2007

RELATED

Deut 30.15–end
Psalm 1

CONTINUOUS

Jeremiah 18.1–11
Psalm 139.1–5, 12–18
Philemon 1–21

Luke 14:25-33 (NIV) The cost of being a disciple

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.'

'Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

'Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.'

Imagine you are a newspaper editor. This gospel passage from St Luke has just landed on your desk. You have to write a headline for it: what would that headline be? Just recall, Jesus makes some colossal demands upon the large crowds who are following him, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother or sister, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.' (14.26) He goes on to give some very practical wisdom on the undertaking of an enterprise building a tower or planning a military campaign. How about this as a headline: Planning and paying.

Planning and paying. Actually it is not the most motivational of headlines; it may be okay for a Chancellor of the Exchequer but is it really going to set our imaginations on fire with a burning passion to be generous in building up God's kingdom? Or in reaching out to the poor and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ?

So how might we unpack the idea of planning to fire us up? The whole corporate world, the world of schools and education and even the church is caught up in the language of planning, strategy and looking forward. Guess what, Jesus was on to that one some time ago. In this passage of St Luke's gospel he is clear about the plans and the strategy that we need to put into place when it comes to our discipleship. It is an all embracing vision one that says that we have to let go before we can give.

First then let's think about how God has shown that he is a bit of a strategist. God has form on strategic planning and its consequences. After all to love the creation into being is a great strategic goal, and the consequences of the freedom given to that creation meant that God would exercise his lavish generosity

in loving it back to him. The cost of that is revealed in the cross of Jesus; a cross which any disciple or follower of his is bound to pick up daily and walk with. God has given everything for our lives, our faith and our trust.

It's funny how there are lots of things we plan in life, but lots of things we don't plan. It's worth just thinking about what we plan and what we don't. For instance many people plan their provision for old age, they plan their monthly income and expenditure, and they plan to save for holidays or Christmas. But when have you ever heard anyone sit down in the morning and plan to breathe during the coming day, or hearing of an unborn child planning to be born on a particular day – although wouldn't that be lovely for prospective parents if they could get in on such a plan. It seems that money is something that we will plan for but when it comes to receiving – breath or life – we receive those gifts graciously, but unknowingly. We know too that lack of financial planning is disastrous and when financial plans are undermined, for instance through pension mis-selling, or negative equity.

So planning and strategy then have to be made material and real. We all know the sort of dreamer who comes up with great plans but when asked how this will happen, finds that there is nothing to back up the idea. Likewise there are those people who are so ready to count every penny of a project that they have no space for the vision or strategy. There is nothing more disheartening than a visionary idea deflated by meanness. Meanness is disheartening because it contrasts so strongly with the generosity of God. God cannot help being generous, overflowing and lavish; these gracious, gospel

words make planning rather more real and tangible. After all, God's plans to love us back were made absolutely real and material in Jesus Christ. So the planning bit of our headline starts to make sense when we can acknowledge God's generosity in our lives: when we let God do that we let him move on to open up our generosity. God has freely and generously given us our lives, our breath; he provides for the earth in abundance, if we could but be equally generous. The cost, the payment comes in the manner in which we worship God, in the way in which we are disciples of Christ, in the way in which we are open to God's transforming Holy Spirit, 'the Lord and Giver of Life.' (Nicene Creed)

Do you feel a sting in the tail making its way into view? Do you feel that there must be a huge 'but' lurking around the corner? We have all met the person who grudgingly goes along with something and then says through pursed lips, 'but how much is all this going to cost?' Well, I am not here to be like the builder giving an estimate, shaking my head and sucking in my breath. I am here to say that what Jesus demands is that we see generosity in a whole new way. Generosity is not like paying a bill; generosity is not the grudging underwriting of a madcap scheme. Generosity for a disciple of Jesus Christ is about knowing that so great and precious a gift has been received that nothing can be counted more highly than that gift. Generosity is only possible from people who have received something. Because all life is a sheer gift from God, something none of us has asked for but something all of us has been given. So how do we swallow Jesus' words about giving up all our possessions about hating our closest relatives? If we are people who have received from God then we are people who give out



our love and generosity as disciples of Jesus in a whole new way. If we are going to be generous we can't be clingy. Not clinging to possessions and people is not to reject them but is to be generous in response to them. Jesus' words to give up possessions and relatives is more about taking on new brothers and sisters, father and mothers in Christ, it is about possessing that which comes from God and not what appeals to our own vanity. The only thing Jesus permits us to cling to is his cross, not our cash or our cousins.

It was precisely this that those first Christians described, again by Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, lived out: 'All who believed had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.' (Acts 2.45) That was their practical response, because they knew how great the gift was that they had received. But it goes on, 'Day by day, as they spent much time in the temple they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2.46). That was part of their receiving, as it is part of ours. Perhaps our first family step to being more generous is by being more thankful: saying grace before a meal is one step in that direction, before we ever get to planned giving and Gift Aid. And look what happened to that generous community, they had 'the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.' That generous community of people who understood themselves to be brothers and sisters and relatives in the Body of Christ was rewarded generously. Had you talked dryly about planning and paying to them; it may well have switched them off too.

Over the next four weeks we will explore further in different ways through St Luke's gospel to see what the spark was that set those first Christians on fire with generosity and what sets us on fire with generosity too. Our attitudes may be shaken and challenged both as individuals and as a church family, brothers and sisters in Christ. At the heart of this whole business of Christian generosity and giving is understanding that what we are about today is nothing less than bringing in God's kingdom.

Our church today as much as anywhere needs to plan and needs to pay; pay the bills, pay the Parish Share, pay for what we want to accomplish under God. The most wonderful missionary sight for a world that usually thinks in rather mean spirited terms is to see a generous Church worshipping a generous God, being good stewards of all we have been given.

'Planning and paying', a dull headline but opened up in the context of Christian generosity and discipleship it takes on a whole new meaning. We have a chance of getting our giving right when we get our discipleship right when together we plan and have visions, when we give up and hand over everything to Christ

Sermon notes

Making a headline for a gospel passage is a cheap stunt really! As we know headlines do not make the whole story. Perhaps, though, we need to think about the phrases and catch lines we use. Are we really conveying what needs saying in our preaching



and teaching?

Do you hate talking about money in general? Do you hate talking about it in church? Why?

How can planning be made 'sexy'? Of course that is not entirely what we are after, but in a world where many working people are familiar with planning, strategies, goals and targets we might just think about how that is reflected in our own ministry and church life. Jesus uses concrete examples. What concrete examples can we draw from our ministry and church life? What examples can we draw from our own discipleship and knowledge of the trust God shows in us? So what we are after is not 'sexiness' but attractiveness and a generous spirit in church life, discipleship and giving.

Additional all age idea

Have a tower building competition – small groups each with lots of newspaper seeking to build the tallest freestanding tower from the paper. Or similarly this can be done with plastic stacking cups. (This could also be two or more all age groups out the front competing with each other.)

