

Sermon 2025.09.07 Thirteenth after Pentecost

During the week, if you follow the news on The Conversation, you will have heard that a compound of churches (I think one Orthodox and one Roman Catholic) with their congregations in Gaza were about to be taken over by the Israeli army, after the inevitable bombardment, during which lives would inevitably be lost. The congregations were refusing to move out beforehand to a supposedly safer area – not because nowhere in Gaza is safe, as we’ve come to know, but because moving out would mean leaving behind older congregation members who were not so mobile. So everyone decided to stay. Now this news was from a week ago and I haven’t heard anything since then - but in any case, this refusal to abandon some parishioners is really putting a decision to put one’s own life on the line for the sake of - the gospel, discipleship; or, to put it more concretely, fellow disciples, other followers of Jesus. It confronts me with the question: would I have the courage to do that? And what would it mean for my relationships with my mother, father, wife, children, brothers and sisters? Well only some of those categories count in my case personally. But I would be turning my back on those closest to me. And they would not be very happy with me. Something similar happened in PNG in 1942 when Bp Philip Strong asked church leaders, teachers and nurses mainly, to stay on in the villages where they’d been placed, and – as I’m sure you know – they were murdered by the advancing Japanese army. The families back in Aust of these church leaders were extremely angry with Bp Philip – even though he, I expect, would’ve

followed his own advice if the Japanese had reached Port Moresby. So how would his family have reacted? Well, anger is one of the stages of grief, we've told (even though I understand that theory is no longer as universally accepted as it once was) – so anger should not surprise us.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells the crowds they'd need to do some hating, if they were to become followers. They would do things that would make their own families angry with them. Their families would be disappointed in them, thinking they were foolish, deluded, pitiable, and lots of other things. Family relationships would be broken, by the call to follow.

Now we have to be careful here, because we're all rightly suspicious of cults, those self-enclosed quasi-religious groups that place unreasonable demands on their members, cloistering them away under extraordinary regimes of discipline. Jesus is not, however, telling anyone to do anything unreasonable – in fact if anything he's doing the opposite. He's saying: take stock of what you're letting yourself in for. If you wanted to build a tower, wouldn't you estimate the cost beforehand? If a king is considering war against an aggressor, wouldn't he consider what resources are available to him, and if they're not sufficient, wouldn't he be wiser to ask for terms of peace?

So it is with you, Jesus is saying to the crowds you're following me, but before you decide finally if you want to stay with me, think about what it's going to cost you. It'll separate you for your families; it'll cause you to give up hope of possessions. These are no light things – just think about it. Before you decide to follow. Now, none of this is very cheery – not exactly good news, is it? But there are other things to notice.

First, Jesus is not impressed by appearances, or crowds. He has compassion on the crowds, as we're told elsewhere, but he's not after crowds of people for the sake of numbers. It's a small gathering that he's calling, but one who will be faithful, who'll be committed, who'll show endurance – he's not impressed with disengaged onlookers; 'throughput' as I'm told some of larger, more noisy churches call it. Rather, like Paul in today's epistle, he looks for joy and encouragement. We can take some joy and encouragement ourselves from this,

Second, Jesus calls us to show this joy and encouragement where we are, as who we are – and we pray not to be tested, not to be led into the time of trial. We're certainly not called to go seeking out times or places of trial, places like Gaza in the present; or PNG in 1942. The Christians of Gaza didn't ask to be led into a time of trial, nor did the PNG missionaries in the 1940s. But these people have to have had to steadfastness and endurance to recognise the signs of the times in their own times and places. We give thanks for them and their witness, and we cannot know in

advance that we won't be tested in similar ways. We need to be ready for such testing if it should come; but also we need to pray not to be tested.

Third, and this touches on the messianic moment I talked about last week: as followers of Jesus we are already the people of God, already the people who have already left our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and so on in that we don't simply live by calendar time but also – unlike them, perhaps – we keep our eyes open for the coming of the Messiah, the one who potentially stands before us in every moment. Where others might just see the passing of moments, seconds and minutes on the clock, we look for and expect to see the presence of the Messiah – who will come and who does come, often when we least expect him.