

## Not Less than Everything

When the Church gives us a tough passage of scripture to read, it is tempting to try and skirt round it, sometimes soften it down a bit, for fear that we should frighten people with the plain, unvarnished words of scripture.

That, surely, is wrong. If scripture is tough and challenging, let's not try and tiptoe round it. Let's engage with it, and let's see what it has to say to us.

Let's first deal with the bit about hating. 'If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and his own life, he cannot be my disciple'. In a way, this one of the easier bits, because I am sure you by now that Jesus is employing a typical fiery preacher's trick of using exaggeration to make his point. In fact, it is a typical Hebraic way of speaking. He does not, most certainly does not, mean hate in the sense that we might use it today. Such a sentiment, as we know, has no place in the Christian way of life. What it really means is that you cannot be a bit of a disciple, a lukewarm, doing it by halves, going through the motions, sort of disciple. It's all or nothing; narrow gate or nowhere, life or death. There is nothing in between; there isn't a third way. He is not saying that you must hate your family and yourself but you must love the Lord more. In fact, you can love your family as much as you want, provided that you put Jesus first. That's the point.

But then he goes on to say that those who are unwilling to take up their cross are not worthy of the name of disciple. The discipline which gives the word its meaning is the discipline of the Cross, the renunciation of self, the stripping away of all that is worldly and unspiritual. Just as you can't be a musician without the discipline of constant practice and grinding hard work and a passionate commitment to the making of music, so you can't be a disciple without the Cross and a passionate commitment to Christ.

Count the cost before you commit. Jesus illustrates this with the example of the builder. You want a tower? Then work out what you need. In modern terms you cost it. Source the materials. Get the surveyor's report. Make sure you have planning permission. Make sure everything is in place and then you build. Fail to do these things and you are in trouble.

In the same way, says Jesus, being a disciple also involves cost, requires thought and resources. In addition to spelling out what being a disciple means he also cautions to be sure that we know what it is that we are committing to, that we are aware of what he is asking, so that, later on, we don't suddenly find that he is asking more than we are prepared to give. It is, in the old phrase, putting your money where your mouth is.

Now of course, in times of persecution, when to profess Christ placed a disciple in mortal danger, Jesus's words would have a special resonance. After all, if you were a Christian back then, you had to be made of stern stuff, if you were to resist the temptation to renounce the Lord at the first sniff of danger. Even Peter failed that test once.

Today, the threat is different. Secularism, that ideology that would relegate religion in all its forms to the margins of society, is trying to gain a foothold in the world. With the visit of Pope Benedict to this country now imminent, you can be sure that groups deeply hostile to Christianity will become more vocal. Some newspapers will run stories to put the Church in the worst possible light and the release of these stories will be timed to coincide with the Pope's visit.

So we have to be constant in our discipleship, faithful to the Lord, and steadfast in our love and, if necessary we must speak up and stand up for what we believe.

Jesus is saying that to be a disciple is not a hobby, not just one weekly activity that we make space for when we have the time between football and the decorating. It lays claim to our lives with the power to transform us and shape everything we do.

In that spirit, we approach the Baptism of Kaylah; questions will be asked, questions of commitment; they will be posed to parents and Godparents but we will all be invited to answer; we will turn from Satan, reject his works and empty promises, for he has nothing that we should ever want, nothing of enduring value; instead, we will turn to Christ and put our faith in him, and resolve to follow him, taking up the Cross and following him. If, in the light of all I have said about today's Gospel, you are still prepared to put Christ first in all things in whatever you do and whatever you say, then we will now stand and proceed to the Baptism of Kaylah.