

AN ADVERT in a Church Newspaper!!

The candidate for the chaplaincy needs to be someone who will make worship appealing, attract visitors, foster faith formation, and build a community of caring people. A healthy congregation should be like a healthy home where people are fed regularly, an atmosphere of calm is maintained, and people are loving and happy.

Jesus need not apply for the post! All this talk about hating family, giving up possessions, and embracing suffering is a colossal turn-off. The fellow from northern Galilee would not be among the finalists!

As C S Lewis once remarked! *“I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”*

We want people to be happy, feel comfortable, and have confidence in themselves. that they made a good decision when they decide to come here to this church! We do not like talk about sacrifice and taking up the cross.

But if we do not speak about the cost of discipleship for the Christian, are we telling the truth? Our Gospel lesson would suggest that we are not. These words of Jesus, recorded in Luke 14, are an urgent reminder that the Christian faith is a way of being, a way of living, a way of doing things differently because we are baptized followers of Jesus Christ; Christianity is not simply a way of thinking or knowing.

Jesus talks about sacrifice, but sacrifice today is not unique to the Christian Church. Everywhere we look we see people making sacrifices for their children, for their careers, for charity.

People in our society are already making sacrifices without church encouragement. What Jesus is asking today is that we think about the things for which we are sacrificing.

Do we exclude our spiritual formation by missing out eternity in our considerations? Faith comes from generosity and commitment and the regular practice of being in the presence of God.

Today's gospel reading is tough, but a tough gospel lesson is the only kind that can really do what it is supposed to do – proclaim the release of captives from a particularly formidable prison, the prison of a destructive family system.

We, the human beings that we are, are a people who understand ourselves by the way we experienced and remember the support of, or betrayal of, our critically important relationships in the past. The late John Bowlby developed a theory that adult personalities are best understood by the quality of attachments they had in their childhoods. Bowlby believed that adults who, as children, experienced traumatic betrayal of their early attachments, needed healing in order to form the bonds of affection that are generally understood as necessary for healthy living in maturity.

Most of us were fed, clothed, and sheltered in the critical first decade of life by our families of origin. With that affirmation, though, we must realistically acknowledge that no family of origin is without flaws. Even in the Bible, we see examples of these flawed family relationships: chemical abuse, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, domestic violence, pathological behaviours stemming from the hopelessness of unresolved grief, and destructive sibling rivalries are all there, along with their confessions and redemptions.

These flawed relationships are a part of our spiritual histories. Many of us have been guilt-tripped and otherwise manipulated by our family members. We may also have done the same to them. To get relief or perspective, some of us have sought out therapy. Others may attend twelve-step meetings.

Others may prefer to seek support from friends or blow off steam with drinking buddies. Because we seek relief by such activities, we find a grain of truth in that old rather impious remark, "Friends are God's way of apologizing to us for our families."

This is where Jesus comes into the picture again. He calls us friends – but only if we do what we are told! Obey his commands, and follow him!

But Jesus is calling us to consider the cost. When we do not consider the cost, then we are like a builder who makes no budget for a project or a king who makes no contingency plans for a battle; we are bound for lacklustre results and frustration.

When we consider the cost of following Jesus, then we will deepen our spiritual lives.

Learning how to adjust to unfulfilled plans, waning strength, failing health and uncertain fortunes, is a key to happiness and contentment. Learning that we are not masters of all we possess, e.g., talents, health and even life itself.

Why should St Paul, having devoted most of his life to the spread of the gospel of Christ, end up a prisoner in chains, with death by violence to follow. Or indeed, why should it be, as stated in the gospel reading, that in order to be a disciple of his Christ says we should carry a cross. Again and again, on our journey through life, we come up against the mystery of suffering, the mystery of the path of the cross which Christ calls us to tread.

One of the saints who suffered all her days, and despite this led a most active life, never allowing herself to be overcome by her troubles, was St Teresa of Avila. She was an extraordinary person, uniting sublime and mystical holiness with practical good sense and humour. When she heard that her close associate, St John of the Cross, was imprisoned, and being ill-treated she wrote, "God has a terrible way of treating his friends, and in truth he does them no wrong, since that was the way he treated his own Son, Jesus Christ."

Why did Christ, in compliance with the Father's will, have to suffer? Indeed, why should any of us have to suffer?

We can approach the problem by saying that all sufferings, especially those associated with death, are concrete evidence of the mystery of evil, our tendency to upset God's purpose, in other words to commit sin.

We can get bogged down with heady arguments about sin and death entering the human experience but truth to tell it will all be a distraction!

St Paul tells us simply that our Saviour Christ Jesus, abolished death and gained life and immortality, because of his utter and absolute dedication to the will of the Father. "If you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved" (Rom 10:9). The heart we associate with emotions, love, trust, confidence. These are the things which give rise to faith, and not intellectual arguments.

After the example of Christ, we are called to abandon ourselves to the will of God, to take up our daily cross, and to identify with Christ suffering, and Christ loving. *St John of The Cross said this:*

Love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved. -

God sends Jeremiah down to the potter's house to make a point:

God makes the pottery. It's our spiritual and religious task to become good, pliable, usable clay, not dried up by worldly concerns and our toxic relationships. We are to be the kind of disciples that Paul is asking Philemon to be: putting aside our past grudges and our need to be in control.

We are called to be those labourers. We reach out to the crowd with compassion. We are new creation. Each of us is a catechist. This is the cost of our discipleship.

This is one of those tough Gospel passages. It's tough because it's so radical, and it's radical because here Jesus is challenging his disciples to change their lives completely, to put what they say they believe about God before any of their own comforts. It's a jolt to our ears.