

R PRINCE

Proper 18
Deut.30: 15-20;
Philemon 9-10,12-17;
Luke 14:25-33

Some while ago a friend of mine, who is not a Christian said that he envied me having my faith. "It must be very comforting to have faith".

Some of you will remember the Charlie Brown cartoons. Charlie had a friend call Linus – who carried with him at all times a comfort blanket. My friend clearly thought that my faith fulfilled the same role. Another colleague at work, after having heard what I did on Sundays, said, in all sincerity, it is good to have a hobby. And so it is!

Well how I wonder would you try to reconcile their thoughts about faith with first of all the reading we had a couple of weeks ago from Luke 12. 49-59 where the leader of our faith says:

"I came to cast fire on the earth and I wish it were already alight. Do you suppose I've come down to give peace to the earth? No, let me tell you, but rather division. From now on, you see, families will be split down the middle"

And the passage from today:

"If any of you come to me" he said to them, "and don't hate your father and your mother, your wife, and your children, your brothers and your sisters – yes even your own life! You can't be my disciple"

Well that rather blows any image we might have of our Lord as gentle Jesus meek and mild! When you first read these passages you are left with the thought that Our Lord may have lost it. Did he have bad days? We know that his family and especially the disciples were a bit of a trial at times, but either they had continued to be a supreme pain in the backside since Chapter 12 or else, like the disciples, we have missed our Lord's meaning.

Here In the United Kingdom in the 21st Century we are about as far away from experiencing what it was like to live in 1st Century Holy Land. But if we were so foolish as to board a plane and, assuming we could, land at Damascus we would begin to move closer to appreciating the words of Our Lord. Just because we live in peace on this little island does not mean that life has stopped being nasty, brutish and short for everyone else.

Luke wrote his Gospel and Acts during a time when Christians were starting to face oppression. As now in Syria, they were in a minority. As with all minorities they are ideal targets for dictators to deflect criticism away from themselves. So the words of our Lord are prophetic. Jesus is saying to the crowd that when you mix faith with human beings you come up with division, distrust and danger.

The one thing that Jesus is not is a politician. He is not after people's votes, which is just as well as they did not have any to give. He has nothing of material worth or gain to offer anyone in this world.

He is straight with the crowd. He tells them how it will be for them, how it will be for people down the centuries and how it is for many thousands of Christians today. If you follow me then you will risk cutting yourself off from human support. You will have to leave the safety of the herd. To have a Christian in the house was and in many places on earth today still is dangerous. Other family members are put at risk, by reason of their association with such a person. Self-preservation takes over and that person is cast out in order to maintain the security of the larger group. To become my follower is to risk being separated from those you love and to risk losing your life. When Jesus says "Take up you cross" he doesn't mean your new direction will be inconvenient or uncomfortable, he means that the crowd risk the most agonising, shameful, degrading death mankind has dreamt up to inflict on other humans.

As he talks to the people, you get a real sense of his anxiety for them because he can see beyond the moment to the cross that awaits him at the end of his earthly journey. He knows that only the cross can give the depth of meaning to his ministry needed to break the hard heartedness of the Jewish people. Even then it will not be enough to turn the hearts of all. He knows too that same fate awaits many who will come after him. His coming sets in train centuries of pain, suffering and execution. You can almost hear the anguish in his voice.

How can we here truly grasp the cost of Jesus' words? It is difficult.

The choice offered by the way of the cross is a stark one. Because of that it stirs deep emotions, love on the one side but hatred, resentment and bitterness on the other. The way of the cross demands commitment. It demands that we put God first, always.

It is hard and like our Lord's final journey to Calvary, we fall and we fall away many times. Our living experience of faith is as much about picking ourselves up each time and taking to the road again as it is in trying to walk the road itself.

We cannot hide behind our roles or use our commitments to others as an excuse for not seeking Him. In my newsletter for this month I spoke of seeing the young swallows on the telegraph wires with their parents. They face a long and perilous flight. Although they fly as a crowd, each one has to make its own journey.

If you wish to come to me says Jesus then you can only come as the person you really are – just you – you alone. Warts and all.

"Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace"