

Home Worship for March 2018 Towards Easter prepared by the Rev Mary Duckworth

Sunday March 4 The Cost of being a Disciple Luke 14: 25-33

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. Luke 14: 26-27, 33

‘Hate father and mother’— can we believe Jesus is really saying this? He wants us to hate not only our father and mother but our entire family? It seems outrageous, impossible, unbelievable. All those we know closest, who brought us up, and with whom we shared our earliest life and common experience – to give them up? It feels like tearing our life in two. What would remain?

On the surface this is what Jesus seems to be saying. And not only that, but also *‘give up everything you have’*, the whole lot. Not even left with half! The other half has to go as well. Shattering, too much! Who would be a disciple?

What does he really mean by father and mother, brothers and sisters? What really makes us who we are and supports us in our life? Haven’t we moved on from dependence on family to instigate all we do ourselves? What motivates our life now? Career? Our own family? Making a better world? Peace and quiet? Doing what’s expected of us or following our heart’s desire? How close is that to following Christ, being his disciple?

Our desires can lead us in all directions. To gorge on food or deny ourselves food. To surround ourselves with lots of things or people, or keep ourselves to ourselves. To search for meaning in life or give up on it. To seek everlasting life for ourselves and others. To follow Christ, which means keeping his commandments. And what stops us from doing this?

Our own immediate needs can certainly demand our attention and fulfilment. What serves ourselves, our own self-interest, comes to the fore. This is the state we are all born into and from which we are to turn if we wish to follow Christ. Swedenborg clearly states that this is the ‘family’ we are to hate in order to become disciples. Jesus teaches us to love others – even our enemies – so in no way would he want us to hate the family we are born into or our children.

Who cannot see that father, mother, wife, children, brethren, and sisters... are not here meant, but such things as belong to persons themselves, and are called their own? For these things people must leave and hate, if they desire to worship the Lord, to be His disciple... and to obtain the inheritance of life eternal. The things that are one’s own are those that are of one’s love, and thus of one’s life into which one is born, consequently they are evils and falsities of every kind; and because these are of one’s love and life, it is therefore said that people must also hate their own soul...

The love of self and consequent love of the world are their father and mother, and the desires arising therefrom, and their evils and falsities are the children...

That this is the meaning is clearly evident from this, that the Lord could not desire that any one should hate their father and mother... since this would be contrary to the spiritual love implanted in every one from heaven, which is that of parents for their children, of children for their parents....,

Sunday March 11 Mothering Sunday Mary, Jesus's mother Luke 8: 19-21

"My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." 8:21

Who wouldn't be startled at hearing these words: *"Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you... you have found favour with God."* [1:28, 30] And even more so at being told you would have a son, who would reign over a kingdom without end! And she just an ordinary girl engaged to be married to an ordinary man called Joseph. And this announced to her by an angel, Gabriel, no less! No wonder she took a step back and wondered what was happening and how this might come about. Yet her acceptance and humility are enshrined in her response, *"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."* [1:38]

This is how we are introduced to Mary in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. This amazing happening is affirmed by her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant miraculously in her old age: *"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"*

Mary is overjoyed and responds: *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."* [1:46-48]

How hard it must have been for her to understand her role. It is not easy for any parent bringing up their first child. The reality is relentless. The caring non-stop – 24/7. The joy unspeakable. In her heart she must have wondered what her real role was - how it would differ from that of other mothers. Jesus was her child and yet God's too. He had a destiny she could not imagine. She could care as any mother – and then what? Simeon at the temple warned Mary, *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel... And a sword will pierce your own soul too."* [2:35] Did this fill her with dread? Did she rejoice in the child she could bring up as any mother and put these words to one side until such time? Did she get a hint of them when Jesus stayed behind in the temple at twelve years old? Her anxiety and astonishment burst out then, *"Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ...But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.* [2:48-49, 51]

Fear and joy must have accompanied Mary throughout Jesus's life. Did her humility and trust in the Lord temper how she responded to all the strange happenings with regard to her first child? Did the 'sword start piercing her soul' when he seemingly rejected and ignored her and his brothers when they tried to see him preaching to the crowds. [Read Luke 8: 19-21.] Or had she felt its touch many times before as he went about his life gradually focusing elsewhere? Any mother has to cope with letting go of her son to find his own way in life and fulfil his own particular use and destiny. With Jesus it had to be a complete letting go. He had to let go of all his human heredity from his mother as he took on divinity from the Father, leading to union of his human with the Divine [glorification].

Such loss for Mary - so that all people could have the opportunity of heavenly life! What sacrifice! How merciful that she had other children with whom she could have a normal relationship! And yet Jesus must have been an incomparable blessing to her, alongside untold pain and anguish of heart and soul. For all of us any child is a gift whom we hand into the Lord's safe keeping.

A woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."

Jesus replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." Luke 11: 27-28

Lord, thank you for the depth of love between mother and child, no matter what happens. Amen

Sunday March 18 Jesus again predicts his Death Luke 18: 31-34

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” Luke 18: 31-33

“We are going up to Jerusalem.” A simple, clear statement of intent, despite Jesus’ knowing that the church authorities found him a threat and were seeking to kill him. His life was in danger. Maybe because of this, he determined to face what was before him. The time was near. His work on earth ending. The final test to be undertaken – on the cross.

The ‘Son of Man’ would be attacked verbally, physically abused and condemned to death. He had knowledge of this from the prophecies read regularly in the synagogues, but his understanding of them was beyond that of any scribe or pharisee. He had fought and overcome battles with the hells during temptations, thus bringing the heavens and the hells into order. This work was almost completed and would be finished with his ‘death’ on the cross. But his life would not end there. He told his disciples he would rise again on the third day. They did not understand a word of what he was saying. It was beyond their imagination - but they went with him anyway.

‘Everything... will be fulfilled’ means subduing the hells, restoring them and the heavens to order, by his own power, and at the same time glorifying His Human. All this was accomplished by means of the temptations which the Lord allowed Himself to undergo, thus by means of the conflicts with the hells which He underwent repeatedly, even to the last on the Cross. Arcana Caelestia 10239.4

The pattern of our life, our spiritual growth and development, is similar to that of Jesus. Outwardly though, we will not face anything like the extreme onslaught Jesus encountered, nor inwardly will we be tested to such utter depths. His work was in a cosmic realm, our milieu is much more limited. We will face testing times when our loyalty is challenged, when we feel the whole world is against us, when we feel our life is about to end. This is what our little egoic self thinks and feels when our true self seeks to align itself with the higher power of the Divine. As we follow the commandments outlined in the Bible, or Word of God, we can become aware of resistance to this. We cannot overcome this by our own will power and determination, but need to call on the Lord to fight on our behalf. He alone conquered through his own power, the divine within him. This is now available to us as we struggle with opposing forces without and within. It might feel agonising at times, but the scale is totally different. Jesus battled with the total forces of the hells to bring order to the whole spiritual world – that we would not be overwhelmed but have the freedom to choose life.

A person’s regeneration is an image of the Lord’s glorification. AC 10239.4

By the glorification of his human the Lord filled Himself with power, in order that by His Divine Human He could keep the hells in subjection forever, maintain the heavens in order, and so regenerate a person, that is, deliver him from the hells and save him. AC 10239.5

We need to head to ‘Jerusalem’, towards a ‘higher’ life – an inner spiritual life in which we open ourselves to the inflow of divine love and light.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? I acknowledge I have no power of my own to overcome the selfish inclinations I am aware of. With you all things are possible. Be at my side, Lord, giving me the strength to say, ‘No!’ and to resist. Guard me and keep me from harm, but when tempted, come closer still and fill me with power to overcome. Thank you for your saving presence with me at all times, loving Lord. Amen

Readings and reflections for Holy Week from Luke's gospel

Journey with Jesus through his last week in Jerusalem, experiencing his joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, as you read the narrative for each day and then quietly dwell on the words chosen, or others that strike you. Let them speak to you in your life.

Lord, as I journey with you during your last days on earth, may I gain some inkling of how it was for you. Be with me also, where I am in my life at this moment. Help me remember that when I am tempted, suffering, under stress or tormented, you are with me knowing exactly what I am enduring, since you suffered likewise in a far greater and deeper way. Amen

Sunday March 25 Palm Sunday Jesus comes to Jerusalem as King Luke 19:28-40

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

From the house of the Lord we bless you. Psalm 118:26

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Luke 19: 38

Monday Jesus at the temple 19:45-48

"It is written, 'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers'."

Luke 19:46

Tuesday Judas agrees to betray Jesus 22:1-6

Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present. 22:3-6

Wednesday The Last Supper 22:14-23

'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. 22:19-20

Thursday Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives, is arrested and disowned 22:39-48

'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' 22:42

'Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?' 22:48

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: 'Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly. 22:61-62

Friday Jesus before Pilate and the crucifixion 23:1-5, 20-23, 32-43

So Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' 'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied.

Then Pilate announced... 'I find no basis for a charge against this man.'

'Crucify him! Crucify him!' 23:3-4, 21

Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' 23:34, 42-43

Lord, thank you for helping me to let go and surrender myself to your unfailing love. Amen