

## **Knox Uniting Church Cluster**

**Sunday September 7<sup>th</sup> 2025 (RCL: Pentecost +13, Prop18 , Ord 23 - Year C)**

**Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church**

**Bible passages:** Psalm 139:1-4, 23-24. Philemon 1:8-16. Luke 14:25-33.

### ***“Look before you leap!”***

How many of you own a cat? (actually, you can never ‘own’ a cat because a cat will always own you, but that’s beside the point). Have you ever noticed that cats are able to climb up things and jump off things, and usually survive? And have you noticed that, when they go to jump off something, they hesitate, they look down, they have a wiggle, they tense their muscles, and finally they leap. (Except when they get stuck up a tall tree. Then you call the SES). It’s like they are carefully assessing the situation before they launch out. They look before they leap.

That’s what Jesus is telling the people to do in today’s reading from Luke 14. Look before you leap. A large crowd of people had been following him, and he turns to them and says, *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”* (v17). It’s as if he is saying to them, “Are you blindly following me? Do you realise what it means?” He wants them to have the fullness of life found in him but also wants them to count the cost of being a true follower. To look before they leap.

Part of that cost, according to Jesus is to ‘hate’ the members of your family! That just doesn’t seem right does it. Our Christian senses tell us that we shouldn’t *hate* anyone, let alone our family. This is one of those readings where it’s worth unpacking it a bit, and it turns out the word ‘hate’ in the original language and culture was more about behaviours than actual feelings. If you choose to follow Jesus, for example, and it takes you away from family responsibilities, it would be deemed that you ‘hate’ your family, even though you still actually love them. And in putting aside family responsibilities it is likely that would bring dishonour or even disgrace to the family, which could easily result in being rejected by one’s family – a big price to pay in deciding to follow Jesus.

We can relate this to our own lives. As we live out the gospel, doing what we feel compelled to do as a Christ follower in the way we live and act towards people there will be times when our family members or friends or colleagues will get upset with us. And that’s not easy.

In this account, Jesus offers two ‘mini parables’ to urge his listeners to count the cost. There is firstly the story of the builder who needs to sit down and carefully work out the total building costs to make sure he can complete the project. To go the distance. Then there’s the story of the King who must first check the size of his army compared to his enemy’s army, before going into battle.

He’s telling the crowd of followers to be aware of what it will take. To have your eyes wide open. To test whether you can carry the cross. To look before you leap.

When I was a boy, I lived in Shepparton where there was a big public, outdoor swimming pool, and that pool had a 10-metre diving platform, which for a number of years, was open to anyone to dive or jump off whenever they wanted – unrestricted. That was until that pulled it down, for good reason I’d say.

Of course I was keen to jump off this tower, to see what it was like. So up I went. I clearly remember to this day how high up it felt and how far down the water looked. Just like a cat, I had a good, long, nervous look before I leaped off. I was assessing whether I had it within me to jump – and whether I'd survive. My eyes were wide open to the risks. But I did leap off.

So, what actually are the costs in being a true disciple? It occurs to me that the costs are both external and internal. By external, I mean those negative things that might happen to us because of other's actions and responses. Rejection, ridicule, persecution, bullying, etc.

But there is often an *internal* price to pay as well, and I think this can even be tougher than the external. As we know, the gospel of Christ is no 'walk in the park'. It stirs and disturbs us. It challenges and stretches us. That disturbing can be from outside or within.

In my own life I have to say I have not experienced a lot of external 'disturbing' because of my faith. It's happened, but not much, probably because most of my family and friends were in the church. Most people have been understanding and supportive of my faith and my choices.

For me, most of the cost has been internal. When I was young, I was very ambitious. I wanted to be the best. I wanted success and all that goes with it. But for me this came into conflict with my faith, and it was a tremendous internal wrestle to let go of what would stand in the way of my faith choices. The internal struggle was even harder when I saw many of my friends and contemporaries pursuing and gaining things that a big part of me was craving.

I believe this combination of external and internal costs would have been experienced by Philemon. We've heard a portion of Paul's letter to Philemon this morning. Philemon had a slave called Onesimus, who escapes. Then both Philemon and Onesimus encounter Christ and their lives are changed. Onesimus finds his way to Paul, who is in prison and the two become very close. But Paul writes to Philemon telling him he wants to send Onesimus back to him and urges Philemon to accept him back, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother", now that both of them "are in the Lord" (v16)

We don't know how this story ends, but I reckon Paul's letter would have disturbed Philemon, because it presented Philemon with a potential cost to pay because of his new-found faith. It's possible he would be aware of the *external* costs – ridicule, shame, rejection, loss of social dignity, from his peers for stooping so low as to accept a slave as an equal. That wouldn't have gone down well, socially.

It's also possible he was faced with an *internal* struggle as he wrestled with letting go of his own pride and ego. Surely most slave owners in those days felt some sense of satisfaction that they had a position of power and influence over others under their control. But he was being asked to let go of that. To change his paradigm. To see Onesimus in a whole new light. That's an internal price he needed to pay, to achieve the blessing of true fellowship with a brother in Christ.

There are times when each of us are called to 'do the right thing', as it were, because of our faith. That often means putting our faith on the line by doing some act of justice or kindness, knowing there will be a cost, knowing there will be resistance. And some of that resistance is going on inside us! Have you ever felt that?

Earlier we heard a few verses from Psalm 139. This is a beautiful Psalm, a favourite for many, which really should be read in its entirety every time. It is likely David wrote it, and we see David marvelling at God's creative genius in forming our complexity and knowing every detail of our humanity - including all our secret thoughts.

But in all its niceness, this Psalm carries a disturbing undertone, because if God knows everything about us, he knows all those things that we're not proud of and which need to be changed. That's why I've added the last two verses, left out by the lectionary. I don't think we should ever read this Psalm without the last two verses which say, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting*". (v23-24)

In other words, are there any ways within me that need to be changed? What is the deeply personal cost I need to face?

We didn't read our other passage from this week, from Jeremiah, where the prophet speaks of the way God is like the potter, and we are like the clay. (Jer 18:1-11). This idea of potter and clay relates to our gospel challenge of the cost of discipleship. For it means that we are allowing God to reform and reshape us. And that can be a real challenge, since it means 'letting go and letting God', as the saying goes. And that's a cost. Personal change is never easy, but the gift of life is worth the struggle.

When Jesus says to the crowd, "Look before you leap" he's telling them to count the cost and keep your eyes open before you leap out in faith and follow him. He saying to them, and to us, to see what can be seen.

There is, of course another side to this, and that is that we can't always see and understand what's before us. There are always hidden, mysterious dimensions to faith. Jesus knew this too, and urges us to step out anyway, even in our doubts. As he said to disciple Thomas, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:29). We still need to step out in faith, and trust, even when it doesn't make sense or we don't know how we will deal with the challenges that inevitably come our way.

So, we need to look before we leap – but we still need to leap!

