**Luke 14.25-33**
*Philemon*

*7th September 2025*

## Faith – it’s never a Piggy-Back!

Minister: Let the words of my mouth
**All: And the meditations of all our hearts**
Minister: Be acceptable in your sight
**All: O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen**

I’ve occasionally come across a Christian whose approach to Bible reading and study is somewhat in the style of a lucky dip. The idea is that every morning you open the bible at a random page, place your finger at any verse and make it your own. God’s promise for you that day.

Well, I’m not sure what such a method would make if Luke 14.26 was plucked out of the air in this way*: If anyone comes after me, says Jesus, and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine.*
Surely one of the most difficult verses in the scriptures because, on the surface, it seems to offend what most people hold dear. What was Jesus up to as he preaches like this? What are we to make of such a way of talking?

Part of the problem with this morning’s gospel reading is the style in which Jesus is preaching as he uses hyperbole and exaggerated rhetoric.

Over the summer we stood with some friends from overseas on Westminster Bridge looking down at the muddy brown river below. Winston Churchill used to say of The Thames that it was the magical silver thread running through England’s history. That’s hyperbole! A rhetorical device employed to press a point home through exaggeration.

I don’t think Jesus was a loose cannon here in Luke 14 and I certainly don’t think that if you pick this verse out for your morning devotions, lucky dip style, that you should take it literally.

Jesus wasn’t in the business of hate but love. His spiritual tradition and Jewish roots were grounded in the Ten Commandments; one of which talks of honouring one’s father and mother. Upon the cross Jesus is at pains to ensure his own mother is provided for as he asks John, the beloved disciple, to take her into his family and look after her.

And yet, as exaggerated as it is, this verse also recognises the power that any family can exert, sometimes unhealthily and unhelpfully, upon its members.

Here in church we would, generally speaking, want to celebrate the sense of identity and security that belonging to a family brings.

Yet, we need to also recognise the heavy expectations that families sometimes lay upon their members can restrict growth and suppress self-exploration. When that happens, the home begins to feel like a prison rather than a sanctuary.

We get the impression that happened in Jesus’ immediately family. The bible even tells us there was a moment as Jesus launches his ministry that his family actually thought him mad and wanted to rein him in.

Parents, partners and siblings probably do want home to be a place of shared values and experiences, yet wouldn’t we also want it to be a place of security from which those we love can emerge and become their own person as they find their own identity.

And isn’t that, really, the point of this passage? It’s about having the courage of your own convictions rather than just becoming a carbon copy of your family’s, your friends’, or even (dare I say it) your church’s point of view. It’s about becoming your own person in discipleship. Choosing to follow Christ, not because it was expected of you but because you’ve made the decision to make faith part of your pilgrimage.

It takes a certain courage to break the ties of the past even as we grew into the future. Yet to stay put, forever in the shadow of someone else’s faith, journey or tradition is to pause our growth. To nourish that journey we often have to step out on our own.

I often tune in on Mondays to the livestream recording of the previous day’s service from churches we’ve visited in the past. One I regularly watch is from Toronto, from Yorkminster Park Baptist Church. Well, the other week they announced that one of the Associate Ministers was leaving. She’s a young minister, newly ordained and I guess Yorkminster Park was never going to be a long-term appointment for her. Yet I detected a wobble in the Senior Minister’s voice as he announced the news to the church. They obviously don’t want her to go, he doesn’t want her to go, yet they know it’s probably good for her to go. To leave this church that has done so much to support her through to ordination. And now she has a new appointment, a fresh opportunity to serve elsewhere. So, with grace and goodwill the Yorkminster Park congregation have given her their blessing and the promise of their prayers as she steps out on the next part of her journey as a servant of God.

All of life has this element of leaving the security of the present and venturing forth into the challenges of tomorrow.

And isn’t this, in a faith context, what Jesus is saying here? We cannot piggyback on the faith of our parents, friends, church or tradition. We need to grasp faith for ourselves. The core values of the gospel need to become our core values. That’s what cross carrying is about. It’s when the love that took Jesus to the cross, it’s when that love, and the convictions surrounding that love, become so embedded in our own hearts and lives that we are defined by the cross and its message of generous self- sacrifice and service.

Today’s reading from the Epistles and Paul’s letter to his friend Philemon also touches on the theme of letting go.

It must be one of the most personal of all the writings in the Christian scriptures. Onesimus is Philemon’s runaway slave who has come under the influence of Paul and these two have formed a friendship. Paul plays on the meaning of Onesimus’ name which means ‘useful’ and tells Philemon that’s exactly how he feels about Onesimus. They’ve formed a partnership and yet it’s now come to an end.

Paul has talked it through with his slave friend and convinced him that he must return to Philemon and try to make things right with his legal master. None of this was going to be easy but at least this letter tries to pave the way.

The point is this: Onesimus must now walk this road by himself. He must leave the shelter of Paul’s patronage and make that long walk back to Philemon by himself. He does this because he knows it’s right, however tough, and for him it’s the only thing to do. And after all the spiritual formation and mentoring Paul has shared with him it’s now time to let him go.

Well here we are on the first Sunday of September, a month that marks the new Academic Year and it’s good for us to remember before God the schools, students and teachers of our area.

Yet every teacher knows that the new students they have received into their classes this week will move on come Summer 2026. They won’t stay in Year 5 or 10 forever. The teacher’s job is to help them in their formation so they can move on next September into Year 6 or 11.

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Many of us probably love the parable story of the Prodigal Son. The story of someone on a journey – often learning what is a good decision looks like because, in fact, he’s made far too many bad ones. It’s a story with so many facets including sibling rivalry, the indiscretions of youth, the arrogance of inexperience and the quiet, persistent faithfulness of a loving father who never gives up hope. Yet at its core is that action of repentance by the Prodigal. A moment of realisation when he literally turns around and starts to walk home. For him it was a eureka moment when it suddenly became such a personally held conviction that he must return.

He had to come to that conviction in his own time and by himself. Yet when he did, nothing would stop him from doing what he knew to be right.

I suspect many of us in church this morning have had similar epiphany moments when the realisation has come upon us that now, in this situation, within this context, at this time I have to make my faith real and do, with God’s help, a new thing, a right thing and maybe even a tough thing.

I really don’t think Jesus, in today’s gospel, is advocating a faith fanaticism that breaks up families. That would have been contrary to everything he taught about community life.

No, but with the use of hyperbole, I think he dramatically makes the point that we cannot piggyback on the faith of our parents and grandparents. Faith must go deep into our own hearts. It has to be upfront and personal.

That wonderful film Billy Elliot had a similar message. It charts Billy’s struggles in his mining community town to convince his father that he wants to dance ballet. It’s a heart-breaking struggle as Billy breaks away from the expectations and prejudices of his father to walk his own path in life. It’s Billy’s journey and he courageously walks it.

By the end we’ve travelled with him over a decade, and the final scene shows him on stage at a ballet in London dancing beautifully and as the film draws to a close, we see his father in the audience looking with such adulation at his son and weeping. At long last he has found a new respect for Billy and his journey.

It’s a great modern-day parable about finding who we are and what we are about even as we leave the family or the institutions which have once nurtured us.

It’s about becoming who we are meant to be. And when put into a faith context, with a cross at the centre, Jesus calls it discipleship.

May our journeys be ones full of personal conviction as we make them confident in the sustaining presence of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green Amersham 3rd September 2025*