

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity 2016

Deuteronomy 30: 15 – end; Luke 14: 25 – 33

So, did you see that? Gene Wilder died this week. The inimitable Willy Wonka. Johnny Depp is just a pale imitation, isn't he? Gene Wilder. Can you think of any of his other films?

Young Frankenstein, Blazing Saddles, Stir Crazy, See no Evil Hear no Evil, Silver Streak, the Producers, The Woman in Red, the Frisco Kid

Gene Wilder: an exponent of that school of acting that says if something's worth acting, it's worth over-acting – surpassed only, perhaps, by Phil Silvers . . . and maybe Jesus of Nazareth, if we take this morning's Gospel reading at face value. You've got to hate this; you've got to hate that; you've got to hate the other.

Don't get me wrong, when I question whether we ought to taking it at face value, I'm not wanting to water it down or side-step the very real challenges that Luke chapter 14 raises if we're serious about being Jesus' disciples. But we do just need to issue a couple

of "government health warnings" about how we set about reading a passage like this.

Firstly, I don't suppose for a moment that this is a verbatim transcript of what Jesus said on a particular occasion. The Gospels are not that type of reporting. Nobody had a Dictaphone to record precisely what Jesus said so it could be quoted back at him on the following morning's Radio 4 Today programme. The Gospels were written decades after Jesus lived. And what they do is faithfully convey the sort of things Jesus said; the way he taught; the impact his earthly ministry had; and the compellingly divine authority with which he spoke.

The first part of this morning's Gospel is a compendium, a collection, of the sort of things Jesus said when people naively and over-enthusiastically responded to him without really taking on board just what was going on. At this stage in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem. Nothing

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was going to shake him from his determination to walk head-long straight into the face of conflict. He was going to face down the forces of darkness, the forces of injustice and oppression, the cant and hypocrisy of vested interest; and he was going to accept whatever the consequences were of facing down those things. And the crowds along the way just didn't get it. They responded as if it were a carnival parade, promising entertainment and spectacle.

Jesus has to dampen down their enthusiasm. There are painful consequences of being a follower of Jesus, *no matter who you are*. That's the point of the second part of the reading, the two parables about building a tower and engaging in war. What Jesus is saying is that whether you live in the world of international diplomacy or whether you are a peasant trying to eke out a living from growing grapes or olives or whatever and you need to protect your crops: no matter who you are, you need to know what you're getting yourself involved in.

The second government health warning that needs to accompany this reading is about this word "hate." Clearly Jesus *cannot mean* that we must loathe our family and be full of hatred and loathing towards them. Jesus told us to love everyone, even our enemies. It would be a funny carry on if we were to love our enemies and hate our sweet old mothers!

The problem is that Jesus didn't speak English: he spoke Aramaic. And things get lost in translation. And in fact he *doesn't mean* that we've got to loathe our family. He means that we've got to detach ourselves so that the many loyalties in which all of us do live are redefined in the light of our discipleship. The implications of discipleship are taken into those relationships.

All this talk about the cost of discipleship, of course, is sort of counter-intuitive to someone in my position, trying to preach. You might say that my task is a bit like selling the Gospel: trying to make the Gospel

sound sufficiently attractive so people are encouraged to respond to the invitation to enter into a life a faith. Only, selling the Gospel isn't like selling aftershave, when all you need to say is "splash this stuff all over and everyone you fancy will find you irresistible!" I can't say "Commit yourself to following Jesus and life will be easy, carefree and fruitful." It's not like that.

Anybody who seriously wants to follow Jesus is going to have to take into account at least three serious issues. The first is that following Jesus means starting a new life. And that means dying to the old way of living. The symbolism of Baptism is that we are drowned. We go down into the water and go glug, glug, glug, glug until we are drowned. And then we burst out of the water to a new life. The old life is gone. And that might mean no more drunken debauchery, but I suspect that for most of us the matter is less glamorous and more subtle. It might, for instance, be more to do with how we exercise our consumer power: putting the fair payment of

producers before bagging a bargain; or paying extra for locally produced goods rather than rather than buying stuff that's been flown half way round the world using up finite resources of fossil fuels and polluting the atmosphere into the bargain.

The second issue that following Jesus confronts us with is rejecting the idolatrous worship of personal choice, where the only ground on which anyone is justified in intervening in behaviour done in private, is the prevention of harm to others: the right of the individual to live as they choose takes priority over all creeds and codes. Christians believe that there is such a thing as virtue; and that being obedient to God is more important than the single-minded pursuit of self-fulfilment.

And the third issue is that increasingly the effectiveness of Christianity is going come to measured, not so much by the extent to which we can influence wider society, as much as the integrity with

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which we form communities that enact the Kingdom of God. And that may well be what “renouncing all that we have” means for our generation.

These are hard choices: that can't be denied. But what those choices offer is what Jesus is recorded as describing as life in all its fullness. Let's hear again the way our first reading, from the Book of Deuteronomy proclaims the choice:

See, I have set before you this day life and good,
death and evil . . . choose life.

Amen.