

“THINNING OUT THE CROWDS”

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Reading: Jeremiah 18.1-11, Psalm 139, Luke 14.25-33

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

If you have been in the neighbourhood this week you`ll have noticed that the students are beginning to pour back into the university. You see them travelling in large groups wearing matching T-shirts – presumably some sort of frosh week orientation exercises. In Varsity stadium the football practices are defining this year’s team lineups. (At least I think that’s what they are doing). Lying along the sidewalks in front of old houses and student co-ops here in the Annex are sad-looking discarded mattresses and broken book-cases, waiting for trash pickup. Out with last year’s detritus, as double-parked rental vans filled with IKEA lamps and Mom’s old sofa slow the traffic down, and deliver fresh loads of student belongings.

It’s an exciting time of year, and every so often walking along the street, you may catch a glimpse of a young face and remember the vulnerability that goes along with the vitality. It’s a bit scary to be a student. There is a lot of anxiety about what school will be like, and whether you will be able to come up to the mark.

Remember as little children, we wondered if this year’s teacher would be crabby or nice. And then later, remember those stories about professors who opened the year with statistics – looking around the lecture hall, they might say, ‘of the 200 of you sitting here now, fifty will be gone by Christmas and only half of you will finish the year.’ Then they’d lay out their expectations ... you should plan on reading a book a

week for this course ... most people fail the midterm ... and there will be absolutely no extensions given for the submission of the term paper. Then they might say, the drop date is two weeks from now, so if you want to find a different course, it's not too late. Intimidating.

In today's reading Jesus sounds like one of those intimidating professors. It's as if he wants to have fewer followers – he looks out at the crowds and says, you have to hate your family, 'hate life itself' he even says, if you want to follow me. You have to carry a cross. Don't begin this if you can't afford to finish it, he says. Or, to use his military analogy, don't fight a battle you can't win. Might as well quit while you are behind, is Jesus' advice. And then, in case you aren't discouraged yet, he says, oh, and by the way, you have to give up all your possessions.

We can rather imagine that among the crowds on a hill in Palestine, and perhaps the multitudes from that day to this, quite a few people are saying to themselves, I wonder when the drop date is.

This very bracing message of Jesus' is not completely new – it echoes the theme of the passage Mary read from the Old Testament. Jeremiah presents God as a demanding taskmaster, more attuned to actual performance than to historic loyalties. I will not hesitate to destroy, God says, just as a potter smashes a failed pot. Only if you mend your ways, will I rework and nurture and shape you as a true vessel of my righteousness.

Passages like these are very difficult for people like us to hear. I mean people who turn up in church. For the most part we don't hate our mothers and fathers, don't hate our lives and haven't given up our possessions. No doubt most of us have lists of self-improvements and reforms we would like to undertake, but not radical disengagement from our commitments. Indeed, life seems challenging enough without undertaking such extreme measures. People carry heavy burdens of grief, we often live with anxiety and pain. We are seldom at our best.

A beautiful moment in the film *On Golden Pond* captures this. Henry Fonda as the irascible old grandfather has yelled at the grandson Billy quite unfairly. When Billy protests, his grandmother, played wonderfully by Katherine Hepburn, says

Billy...
sometimes...
you have to look hard at a person...
and remember...
that he's doing
the best he can.
He's just trying
to find his way, that's all.

It is the psalm reading today that captures this more tender view of the human condition. Psalm 139 offers the solace of God's constant loving presence, as we repeat together that we are wonderfully made, and never – not even at our worst – never out of the reach of God's sustaining love. Elsewhere we are told that some days, when Jesus looked out at the crowds of people who were gathered to hear him, instead of chiding, he healed them in their hundreds, he laid hands on the children, he told them he would give them rest – and that he said to the disciples, 'Find something for these folks to eat'.

As we read the prophet's words, then the psalm and then the words of Jesus, we eavesdrop on the theological questions of the writers of scripture. We join in their struggle to capture the essence of the divine reality, an ambiguous picture, in which it seems we are both judged and forgiven.

In our childish vocabulary we wonder, is God crabby or nice? In more classical theological terms we attempt to place side by side the two seemingly conflicting notions, God's justice and God's mercy. God's righteousness and God's compassion. In our weaker moments we may think that God's justice ought to apply to *them*, and God's mercy to *us*. [You know, that sort of, I'm so innocent and they are so wicked mentality.] But we know that isn't really it. The Christian tradition documents a long

and complex attempt through the centuries to express the conviction that in the mystery of Christ absolute righteousness and utter compassion come together. This is what I call one of the theological perennials. The difficulty of imagining a solution to the conundrum is what keeps it alive for us, and keeps us working on it.

Of course we know that some of our best teachers were the ones who had the highest expectations. Becoming a follower of Jesus is a slow and demanding process. And we know there are possessions we do need to give up – not only material things but as theologian Emily Townes’ catalogs them, “our need to acquire, our yearning for success, our petty jealousies, our denigrating stereotypes of others, our prejudices and hatreds and more.” We can probably all add our own examples. Perhaps for someone it is bondage to our work and addiction to overwork that needs to go – Labour Day weekend might be the right time to consider that. Or for someone else it may be attachment to an unhealthy family role or expectation that sucks up all the good energy of abundant life. For another, perhaps it’s the burden of guilt for some old sin long past that needs to be set down in order to follow. Each one of us is called to think it through – to do the arithmetic, as Jesus says of the man who is planning to build a tower.

We don’t know what happened after Jesus’ sermon to the crowds that day. Were they inspired and determined to lead a life of sacrifice? Did a large number just go quietly home to wait for the next itinerant preacher? We don’t know. But we may imagine the disciples, as the little band trudged along the dusty road to the next town on the way to Jerusalem. I would think they wondered what they were getting into. And so should we.

Amen.