**Philemon 1:21 and Luke 14:25-33** (Trinity 12, year C)

I thought I’d start today with a story to get us thinking. It’s a story about a hen and a pig. Bear with me on this one. This hen and pig were the best of friends and did everything together. One day they were out walking and they passed a church that was advertising it’s food bank and meal service to those in need. They were asking people to volunteer to help. The hen said: “I know what we can do to help, it’s so obvious. We can offer ourselves as a meal of bacon and eggs”. Pig paused as he thought for a moment. “Hmm”, he said… “I’m not so keen on your idea Hen as I think there might be a bit of a problem with it. For your suggestion only requires a contribution from you, but for me, it requires total commitment”.

….and it’s that total commitment that his story speaks of that is also illustrated in different ways in each of our Bible readings today; all of which look at the cost of discipleship and the commitment required. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer a German Pastor and theologian said, “salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life”.

Discipleship is something that gets spoken about a lot in the Bible and church, in fact I spent last Tuesday at York Diocesan House on a curates training day, being asked to think about what discipleship really means. So, I will put that question out to you all – What does discipleship mean to you? We are all called to be Disciples: to have a relationship with God, spending time with God to learn more about him and ultimately to become the best version of ourselves (modelling our life on Jesus’) that we can be. And we are all called to disciple others – to point them to Jesus and to help them to learn more about him. On the face of it, it doesn’t sound too hard. But the truth is that God needs us to be “all in” – not just offering the bits of us and our lives that we feel we can afford without too much loss. God need us to give him our all – to allowing him into every aspect of our lives….. Kind of less hen, more pig-like.

This theme is something that seems to be coming up each time I preach, so I am beginning to think that God might be trying to tell me something! But today I’d like us to cast our attention to the passage we’ve just heard from the book of Philemon. I don’t know how many of you know this book well, but I can confidently say that before this week I didn’t, other than knowing it is one of Paul’s letters that he wrote during his time in prison.

The book of Philemon is the smallest of Paul’s letters, consisting of only 1 chapter of 23 verses, but it packs a punch. It is the only of Paul’s letters which does not explicitly mention the cross and its meaning, which is most unlike Paul if you know his writing, but we will learn the reason for this in a moment.

To give you a bit of background - Philemon was a wealthy Roman citizen who was from Colossus and most likely first met the Apostle Paul during Paul’s mission in Ephesus. Philemon had a slave called Onesimus who had wronged him in some way and had run away from him. During this time Onesimus went to visit Paul in prison and told him what had happened. On the back of this, Paul then writes to Philemon with a very bold request. He asks him not only to forgive Onesimus, but to take him back in his home and embrace him not as his slave again, but as a brother, as an equal. He is asking him to overlook his rights within Roman Law and requesting that he frees his slave to become a member of his family.

Paul is asking Philemon to forgive and forget and to move on with grace beyond what is deserved. Does this remind you of another significant event in the Bible? Can you see what Paul is doing here? Paul is taking on the role of reconciler - where he is acting to the restore the relationship between Onesimus to Philemon. But the relationship restoration here goes beyond how is began. It is a bit like a broken object restored by Kintsugi, if you were here for my sermon on that. Where the object is made more beautiful by the liquid gold holding the pieces together.

Paul does not need to mention the cross in this letter, because he is demonstrating its action through his writing and teaching. He is reminding Philemon that he is a disciple of Christ and that Philemon, just like each of us, received the gift of undeserved forgiveness and grace when Jesus died on the cross for us. Where Christ reconciled us to God, restoring our relationship with him and each other. So, Paul is reminding Philemon of this and asking him to act as a true disciple of Christ – to go the extra mile, to turn the other cheek; to show God’s love and grace without any boundaries to another.

Here we learn how we should demonstrate love and grace within our everyday lives. But this is not always easy. Think back to the pig and hen in our story at the start. It’s ok when we’re like the hen and choosing which bits to get involved with. It’s easy to love and spend time with the people who we like and love us back. However, it’s difficult to love and forgive those around us who have wronged or hurt us, but that is exactly what we are asked to do. Because that is exactly what Jesus did.

So, being a disciple is hard and can be costly, but God to help us but we need to start by remembering to give God first place in our lives. And this is what Jesus is saying in our Gospel reading today, although his words seem a little hard at first. He needs to be at the centre of all we do and are if we are truly his disciple and following him.

In the summer holidays we spent a week in the Austrian Alps where it felt like wherever we went Christ was there with us. Obviously, that is true, but the Austrians had done a great job of helping us remember this as they had placed beautiful carved wooden crucifixes with Christ on everywhere we went: at the bottom of waterfalls, at the top of the highest mountains – wherever we turned Jesus was there.

And I realised what a difference these visual reminders made to me and how they helped me keep my focus on God throughout the day, in turn reminding me to try and show God’s love to others that day. So, our first challenge this week is to find ways of connecting with God each day so that He is at the centre of all we do. This may be through spending time in nature, gardening, walking, in silence, through music, prayer alone or with others, and through reading our Bibles. And secondly if you get a chance, to go back and read through the book of Philemon (it’s a very short read) and think on what Paul was teaching. To remember the undeserved, never-ending love and grace that God gives to each one of us. And to pray that are hearts are changed, and we are able to extend this same love and grace to those around us.

Amen