

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 7th September 2025 i.e. 12th Sunday after Trinity.

Deuteronomy 30:15-end

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In last week's Gospel Jesus was having dinner in the house of one of the Pharisees. And as he tends to do, Jesus uses the fact they were all sitting down for dinner to teach them something about the kingdom of God. So he tells two parables about dinner parties; but since people obviously didn't get the message, he goes on to tell a third parable about the kingdom of God, again using the image of a banquet. The repeated message in each of these parables is that the people who feel most entitled end up being humbled; and the people who maybe didn't think that they belonged at all end up being the guests of honour.

All of this is an explicit challenge to various sorts of pride. In those parables it's the pride that comes with membership of a club; the pride that comes with the appearance of wealth and health and autonomy. This week Jesus attacks another potential source of pride. And if what he says doesn't make us feel uncomfortable on some level we probably aren't listening.

Luke says that after Jesus tells these parables, and after he has been healing people left, right, and centre, large crowds are now following him. Jesus has become popular; and perhaps there's a risk that he will go the way of all demagogues. Public figures with a mob behind them may look to settle old grudges; or they may look to consolidate their power by attacking some small group that has no one to look out for them – does that sound familiar? That might have been Christianity: just another way of motivating a mob. At some points in history people have tried to use Christianity that way. Sometimes they've succeeded, to our collective shame.

But as you may have noticed there's something different about Jesus. He could have become a populist. But instead of running with the mob, or being run by the mob, Jesus does the unthinkable: he tries to persuade people not to follow him, or only to follow him for the right reasons. He knows that to follow him you have to be willing to be humbled, to be overlooked, and to suffer. So he turns to the crowds and says,

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and

sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. [Luke 14:26-27]

Maybe the crowds understand that he's talking about the Roman instrument of humiliation and torture, but it's unlikely they've joined all the dots at this point in the story. Unlike them, we know where Jesus is headed.

To drum home the point he tells two parables for wannabe Christians who aren't prepared to lay down their pride. A person who wants to call themselves a Christian but who doesn't want to be humble is like a person who starts building a tower without properly budgeting. Maybe they can start well enough. But they're going to be humbled one way or another: if not by choosing to take up their cross willingly, then perhaps through the ridicule they will receive when they inevitably fall away from their purpose. Humiliation isn't necessarily a bad thing: it might achieve what the person couldn't achieve by themselves. Perhaps it will draw them closer to the God who chose the way of humiliation for our sake.

There's another parable about humility. This time, it's a picture of national pride and national humiliation. Imagine being the king who really wanted to start a war, but who realises too late that they have bitten off more than they can chew, so they have to make peace after all. Luke says that all of this is about giving up possessions [14:33], but it's clear that there's more at stake here than just the objects we claim to own. If, as Jesus says, we have to “hate” our families and our very lives, that suggests something even more extreme than poverty. If I call myself a Christian I'm not allowed to be proud of my wealth and health and autonomy; I'm also not allowed to dwell on my family connections, my inheritance, my national culture. True Christianity calls us to put all of those things to one side, to prefer only to follow Jesus.

It's difficult to do that in the abstract. Thankfully Jesus gives us practical pointers: he tells us and shows us that being humble is really all about other people. Rather than working really hard to perfect something in myself, if I want to be humble I should make my life all about other people and their needs. Specifically I need to make my life all about people whose own lives are out of control: as Jesus says several times in this one chapter, it is all about “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame”. This is of course only an indicative list of the sorts of people we should be thinking about. We're encouraged to add to it.

A few minutes ago I said that maybe people didn't know what Jesus meant when he talked about “carrying the cross”. We don't need to look far to find other groups who don't quite understand what carrying the cross means.

For the last couple of weeks there have been protests across the nation outside hotels where asylum seekers are being temporarily housed. There's more of that to come apparently. Notice: we're not talking about economic migrants, although all migrants are increasingly vulnerable here in the current climate. We're talking about asylum seekers: people who, by long tradition and by law are allowed to come to this country; who abandon everything they have and everyone they know to seek refuge in a strange country from violence and persecution at home. They are people in other words who have a very good claim to be included among those who Jesus says will come first in the kingdom of God.

Again: the idea that we should show compassion to people in our communities whose place here is marginal is not a fringe Christian position. You can't dismiss it as novel, or liberal, or woke. It is at the heart of the gospel. And who could be more marginal than a refugee?

At the same time, over these last few weeks we have also been encouraged to express national pride. What people have called “Operation Raise the Colours” has had people putting out Union Flags and St George's crosses, and painting crosses on roundabouts. We have a couple here in Dorchester, one a few streets over from here. There's a lot of things I could say about this; many of them were said by Rowan Williams in an article he wrote this time last week. He asked the same question I wanted to ask today:

The flags running up all around us are supposed to declare a pride in our identity and heritage. But what is it that we are proud of? What is it that we are defending?¹

One of the things we're supposed to take pride in is the fact that this is a Christian country. Our flags are Christian symbols – crosses on top of crosses. For what it's worth I do take pride in our national Christian heritage. At it's best our national Christianity has expressed itself in hospitality to the vulnerable and the care of the sick. I'm thinking particularly of the Kindertransport during World War Two, which I see as continuous with our tradition of receiving asylum seekers. The fact that we

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/30/refugees-migrants-hotels-humanity?fbclid=IwY2xjawMgS2FleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHtHZXl7BPTWKD4mysjZVI05xnGgPRWrcGlZbjzclqfgPIC8MOyTFWYgj-kPw_aem_8fJnCtBCNMQnd3Hyvddkmg

helped create international conventions on human rights, and that we largely still subscribe to them, is another reason for national pride. I notice that some of the loudest voices calling for national pride don't like human rights so much. Again: it makes me wonder what they think we should be proud of.

It's natural to love your country, much in the same way that it's natural to love your immediate family, or your own life. I call the natural love of country “patriotism”. But as I said back in Holy Week, there's a big difference between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is about loving your country *and therefore wanting it to be better*. Nationalism is the cynical use of patriotic language by people who may not actually love their country at all. Nationalists exploit patriotism in order to gain power – power which they may not actually use in their nation's best interests.

I think there's a case to be made for a rational and compassionate patriotism. But I wonder whether we as Christians can do better than that. What if instead of simply painting crosses on the road, we actually took up our cross? What if, instead of looking for reasons to feel proud, we notice how badly we've misjudged our cultural budget, and we try to do something positive about it?

We need an honest conversation about how so-called economic progress has left so many communities behind; we also need to robustly defend the successes of the twentieth century – especially human rights. You don't achieve those things by being proud; you do it putting your pride to one side and in humility embracing your neighbour, whoever they are.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.