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Call and Response (Luke 14: 25-35)

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We're reading from the middle section of Luke's gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he's walking, we're told, 'through one town and village after another, teaching as he [makes] his way' (13: 23). He's accompanied by his disciples, he's accumulating crowds of followers, he's manifesting by word and deed the counter-cultural, difficult to grasp character of God's kingdom and the way of discipleship. He speaks in parables where metaphors, images and paradoxes proliferate and rub against one another. And this suggests that understanding what he's on about is not a matter of grasping a single line of argument, so much as catching onto the rhythm of a new way of being in the world. There's something to get the hang of here, and we miss it if we're too literally minded.

Just prior to the reading we had tonight, Jesus has told yet another parable about the reign of God. It's the one where someone gives a great dinner and invites many guests (14: 16ff). But when the time comes and those invited are bidden to the table, they're all of a sudden unavailable and begin to make excuses. One needs to inspect a new purchase of land, another is trying out a new yoke of oxen, and another has just been married. When the host hears these implausible, last minute reasons for refusing to attend the feast he's prepared for them, he becomes angry and tells his servant to 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame'. When there is still more room, he sends the servant even further afield to the roads and hedges to 'compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled' (14: 21-24). Those who are originally invited, he says, will not taste my dinner, and yet those who are usually considered unworthy – the poor, the outcast, even the Gentiles who live outside the towns – are 'compelled' or pressed to come to

dinner. This is a parable about how the only ones excluded from the kingdom are those who exclude themselves, and about the radically inclusive hospitality of God.

Well, the message that all are welcome seems to be getting through. Tonight's passage opens with the words: 'Now large crowds were travelling with him'. I imagine a certain kind of scene – perhaps a boisterous, rollicking kind of gathering – people enjoying following this charismatic preacher who is nicely putting those annoyingly scrupulous scribes and Pharisees in their place. Maybe a certain party atmosphere is developing, a first century road trip of sorts. And then Jesus turns to face them and throws a major spanner in the works. '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' (14: 26).

And bang – right there – we're in the midst of one of the central paradoxes of the Gospel. Many are called, but few are chosen. All are invited, but not many will enter in. Jesus' words are, of course, hyperbolic, rhetorically charged. This isn't a literal instruction to hate close family members, or even to renounce family ties. It is, though, about sobering up to the magnitude of what's involved in following him and being drawn by him into the life of God. This isn't just some easy-going picnic. And it's precisely because Jesus knows how important family ties are, how deeply constitutive of our lives, that his words are so shocking. They bring us up short, waking us up to the depth of the call to discipleship, and the level at which our existing structures of identity and belonging must be undone.

Jesus offers two further images of the reckoning required before committing to his way. Which of you, intending to build a tower ... Or what king, going out to wage war ... Significantly, though, the cost to be reckoned in relation to discipleship is not so much to do with amassing your resources (accumulating capital for a building project, increasing the size of your army), but is to do with your willingness to give up everything else: 'none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions'.

I said earlier that in all Jesus' teaching, there's something to get the hang of that we miss if we're too literal-minded. Of course, in the history of our faith, this exhortation to be dispossessed of everything has been enacted literally by some. In the best of the monastic traditions, it's constituted a context for the journey of discipleship. But this monastic form of life is not going to be for most of us. Personally I have no intention of giving up all my possessions and living under a bridge, nor of severing all contact (as strict Carmelites do) with my family of origin. So what are we, we who live in suburban Canberra with important commitments to parents, partners, children, siblings, to make of Jesus' hyperbolic wake up call to the crowds that have begun to follow him?

On the one hand, we can't evade the recognition that the call to follow, really to follow Jesus, has magnitude. Something big is at stake. The radical hospitality of God co-exists with the radical call of God, and that means I can't expect my life will remain unchanged. Discipleship isn't a hobby I can slot in alongside the way of life I already have and am attached to. It means something, and it takes something, and I must ask myself if I'm up for that. For me, it took years really to give myself to following – and that was because at some level I understood and was terrified of the loss of security and self-determination that true obedience would involve. Once I said 'yes', really said 'yes', then my life, my career, my reputation, my future were not my own anymore. 'None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions'.

On the other hand, however, what our 'yes' will mean – the possessions we might be called to give up – we cannot know and cannot give in advance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has written powerfully about Jesus calling Levi, in Mark's gospel. The text says: 'As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me". And he got up and followed him'. (Mk 2:14) Bonhoeffer comments: 'And what does the text inform us about the content of discipleship? Follow me, run along behind me! That is all. To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to

strive after. It is not a cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion, even the devotion of ourselves. What happens? At the call, Levi leaves all that he has – but not because he thinks that he might be doing something worthwhile, but simply for the sake of the call'.¹ Discipleship in essence is about living responsively, or as Thomas Merton put it – 'living as listeners',² handing ourselves over without remainder to the call we hear.

Over the next few weeks at Benedictus, we're focusing on the theme of Call and Response. We'll be hearing from different members of our community how this dynamic of being called and discovering what it means to respond has played out in their lives. I know that perhaps for some you, it feels difficult to apply this language of 'call and response' to yourselves. Maybe you don't feel you've had a particular moment of being addressed or invited to respond. Maybe you feel as though you're hanging around at the back of the crowd, wondering whether you belong here at all. But I invite you not to rule yourself out of the story too quickly. It can be a journey to come to the point of hearing anything, let alone recognizing what the voice of Jesus might be inviting us towards. Hearing the stories of others is one way we may begin to see our own story differently, and be open to new perspectives on where we find ourselves.

Discipleship is always about deepening our listening – becoming ever more fully attuned and responsive to God's still, small voice, entrusting ourselves ever more unreservedly to the way. My prayer is that over these next few weeks all of us – Neil and me on pilgrimage, our Benedictus community, each of you may be intentionally and generously open to listening, seeking to hear afresh God's call on our lives and to respond whole-heartedly. This is how we remain a living people, and how our life together becomes a gift – blessing – for the world.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), p.58.

² Thomas Merton, 'The Quickening of John the Baptist'.