

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
2nd July 2016

In the early 1990's I was part of a group of Rural Fire Service volunteers from the Blue Mountains who attended a course run the Royal Australian Navy at their firefighting training school. The Fire School's emblem which was on a patch worn by the instructors and was emblazed across the forecourt entry to the School's main building featured a warship on fire with the motto "Learn or Burn". I've got to say the School liven up to its motto the student were left under no doubt that they would either learn or burn. Not that anybody was actually burnt but the intensity of the training left no room for complacency this was a matter of life and death. The Navy's training was a radical departure from what I had experienced before and I realised their motto was meant to focus the students mind on what was important.

When I read the first paragraph of Mathew's Gospel where Jesus says anyone who prefers their mother, father, brother or sister to me is not worthy of me I'm left just as perplexed. What is Mathew on about? Does Mathew seriously want me to disown my family in

order to follow Jesus? Could this seriously be the same Jesus who in John's Gospel commands his disciples to love one another as I have loved you? If I take this approach it's almost equivalent to me thinking that at the Navy's Fire School I'll either learn or burn but there is more to the learn or burn motto than the literal interpretation. What the Navy is saying is in a fire this training will save your life. What Jesus' is saying is that you are called to radical discipleship; you must prefer nothing to me. Today's Gospel echoes the message of last week where Jesus urges his disciples not fear the destruction of their body but to fear what can destroy their soul. Jesus's message is quite uncompromising you must prefer nothing to me. In the time of Mathew with no Centerlink, no safety nets, no superannuation, no pension, ones only security was ones family. Without your family you were reduced to begging and in all probability death by starvation. Without your family you had nothing. Your family was your only form of material security. Jesus is telling his disciples that discipleship involves an abandonment of traditional values of security.

Jesus realises this call to radical discipleship will cost, what's why He tells His disciples that following Him will

involve taking up a cross. The cross is the cost of discipleship. It's not easy to be a follower of Christ because treating people as Christ would, will cost you. If you don't believe this take any social issue, homelessness, mental health, asylum seekers or the state of the environment and ask yourself this simple question: What would Christ do or say? If we as a society embraced the Gospel message none of these issues would arise. Could Christ support 'turning back the boats' or a state that declares itself, to be the envy of the world yet can't provide for the homeless or the mentally ill in the community. I'm quite happy to say my cross is my illness or something I control but I'm quite uncomfortable in accepting a cross that not of my making a cross that might involve me taking up an unpopular cause. I find it easier to pray than to speaking out for the homeless or the mentally ill. But speaking out is what Christ would do and to be a follower of Christ that's what I'm called to do. I can't define following Christ on my terms no; I can only follow Christ on Christ's terms. All prayer including our Sunday Eucharist calls us to action, Christ acted in the world.

That is why Christ says if anyone finds their life they have lost it. If I define what life is on my terms I have effectively lost it, because life can only be defined in terms of Christ. In fact in order to find my life I have to give up worrying about material security and embrace Christ's message. I've got to let go and let God. I don't know about you but the concept of abandoning my life to God is pretty confronting. I always know what needs to be done to fix it, my ego always has the final answer, but the final answer is not defined in my terms but in terms of Christ.

The Zen Master Linji taught his students: "If you meet the Buddha on your journey, kill him." Now this may seem an unlikely Buddhist teaching but it means that whatever your image is of the Buddha, it's wrong! Now kill that image and keep practicing. Christ teaches us that whatever our image of life is it's wrong lose that image and keep following Christ. Only a life rooted in Christ can lead us to the Father.

The hallmark of a life rooted in Christ is love a love that manifests itself in how we welcome the stranger. Because in welcoming the stranger we are in fact welcoming Christ. Imagine a world that welcomed you

a world where you knew you would always be welcomed anywhere. If you believed in the very core of your being that you were always welcome all fear would disappear. I may think such a world is impossible but that's what Christ calls us to that is what radical discipleship is all about. I can think of a million reasons why it won't work but that my ego talking. I can think people will think I'm crazy for even thinking about unconditional welcome but that may well be the cross I'm called to carry. If I abandon my idea of a good life and follow Christ it will take great courage on my part. But I ask myself what's the alternative? I look at the world around me, the impact of all the Mister Fix Its, yes they are mostly male, the misery of good ideas. I ponder what could have been and I think to myself we may indeed have to "learn or burn".