

“Bad ads, good ads.” Luke 14:25-33

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

I would like to invite you to a little thought experiment. Imagine that you were hired to prepare an advertisement campaign for the Church, for Christianity; how would you market it? What tagline would you suggest?

What message would you advise? This is important, because, in fact, we all are sent as Jesus’ messengers, and we all are to tell others about Him and about what this whole Christian thing is about. How would you go about?

I imagine that this is something most of us have thought about already. More, something that most of us have struggled with; for the answer is not obvious. How do our thoughts run? How do we want to present our Christian way?

I keep catching myself that I want to present it as something that delivers what people long for. The answer to the prayers of their hearts. As something that they truly need, even if they are not aware of it.

We want to offer people something that they would find pleasing, attractive, interesting for themselves. And on the one hand, that is not entirely wrong, because that is true that Jesus is the answer to all that we may desire and long for.

The problem is with how we may want to frame our message. “I invite you to become a Christian, so that the deepest longings of your hearts get satisfied.” Really? Where is the focus? On us!

On me... your deepest longings, my deepest longings. Then it is all about me in the centre, about the Christian way being means to satisfy my appetites and cravings. Then it is not about the Triune God, it is not about Jesus Christ, it is about... me.

Today's Gospel reading provides for us a challenging alternative. Today we heard from the lips of Jesus Himself how He advertised the Christian way. Just listen to these remarkably attractive slogans once again. What a masterpiece!

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple... Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Isn't this great?! Marvellous!

Basically, Jesus briefly lists everything that we value and find attractive in this life and then states that we need to hate those things, we need to give them up, renounce them all, or we can't be His disciples. What about this approach?

How appealing do you find it? Would it work? As far as our fallen human reason can tell us – no way! Why would it work! Furthermore, think about the day of Jesus' crucifixion. He has been advertising this way for three years.

His message had reached thousands and thousands of people. And how many of them did follow Jesus? How many were there at the cross? A handful of women and John the apostle. Does that sound like a success?

What should we conclude? That that was a bad advertisement strategy? Bad message? It certainly feels like one. What do you think? "Take your cross!" And then Jesus Himself gets crucified.

"Come, follow Jesus!" And then all His handpicked messengers get murdered because of the same message. But then... something happens. This very strange advertisement appears to work. Not just to work, but to work miracles.

Today, two millennia later, there are more than 2.5 billion people who at least self-identify as Christians. 2.5 billion! How did that happen? Was Jesus' campaign successful? It appears it was; it has been wildly successful.

But how could that be? Why would such message work? "Hate your family, your loved ones, even your own life and well-being, renounce everything you have and only then you can be my disciple." Who and why would embrace such message?

Let us examine three reasons why it would work, and perhaps that will help us to consider how we want to present our Christian way to others, and where to get courage to speak such a counter-intuitive message.

The three reasons are: Jesus cares for us, Jesus remains with us, Jesus welcomes us. He cares, remains and welcomes us. Let's begin with Jesus cares for us. We could say that what He says are not arbitrary demands that He lays on us. Instead that is an expression of His heartfelt care for us. What do I mean by that?

We could expect that Jesus would say something like “unless you hate bad people and drinking and smoking and fornicating and stealing and lying and so on... you can’t be my disciples.” That would make sense.

Instead, He say “unless you hate your family, your closest people, and your own life, unless you renounce all the good things you have, you can’t be my disciples.”

What? At first sight it doesn’t make sense. For those are all good things.

What is going on? What Jesus says is about our ultimate allegiance, it is about the 1st Commandment. Remember, we should fear, love and trust the Triune God above all things. It is about seeing everything as it truly is.

All these good things, and also all the good things that we receive through our families, and work, and hobbies, and friends, such as – the sense that our lives matter, that we are loved and accepted, that we can feel safe about our future, that there is a purpose for our existence, etc., they all are – gifts of our generous God.

Just think about this – He is the only person among almost 8 billion of the Earth population, the only one in the whole Universe, who knows all your thoughts and secrets and longings, who knows you better than you do, and He cares for you more than you know. Those all are His gifts. A part and parcel of our daily bread. Something that our gracious God gladly and abundantly provides for us.

But what happens? We tend to cling to the gifts as the source of all good and our help in all distress. These gifts are good. Very good. We are blessed to have them. But they are not substitutes for the Giver. They are gifts of good creation.

But our God is the Creator. Whenever our hearts make the mistake to cling to those gifts more than the Giver, whenever we trust them more, love them more, fear to lose them more than the Giver, we will suffer. Distress, loss, disappointment.

What Jesus says is simply: “It is me who cares for you, who provides for you, I am the source and the author of all those wonderful gifts, don’t put them before me for that is not going to work!” Then also His more challenging phrasing makes sense.

“Hate them!” It is not about hating our loved ones, or ourselves or other good things in our lives. Our God commands to love and honour and care for our loved ones, to appreciate and enjoy our work, to delight in our hobbies and so on.

But we are to hate anything that wants to take the place of our God, the place that is rightly reserved for Jesus Christ. For when that happens, we have turned good gifts of God into idols, and that never ends well. But Jesus... cares for you.

Yes, He cares for us and, secondly, He remains with us. What is that about? You will know this from your own experience; our loved ones, our work, our friends, career, success, fitness, beauty, fame, etc., they all are right here.

They are real. They are tangible. They are right in front of us. Not so with Jesus. Yes, we hear about Him, we sort of know about Him, but... that is not the same. My

family, my spouse, my children, my parents, my studies, work, career, business, hobbies, interests – they are right here and it is easy to focus on them.

It is easy to believe that they are more real than that Jesus of the Bible. It is nice to hear about Him, sure, it is nice to know He loves us, we can spare a couple hours for Him on Sunday morning, but then we need to rush back to the real-life stuff.

It may be hard with that allegiance to Jesus; what if our loved ones despise God? What if they demand us accept their lifestyle that is contrary to God's good design? What if our dear friends like us as long as we don't speak that Christian stuff?

And we like our friends and don't want to lose them. What if our workplace demands choices or actions contrary to God's instructions, if we hope for a career, or even to keep our job? How can we keep that allegiance to Jesus?

Sounds familiar? Surely, this is how we experience our life. But there is something we all are blessed to learn as we go through this life, some sooner, some later. All those seemingly real and urgent things in our lives, those that seem so much more real and urgent than Jesus, they are not here forever. They all fade away.

This is true about people, even the most important people in our lives. We don't live forever. Our relationships tend to deteriorate and sometimes go sour. The excitement of our career may turn into burden and toil. Fame, beauty, fitness fades. Wealth can disappear. Even our very lives one day come to an end.

Everything is only temporary, whatever important it may appear at any given moment. Then what remains? Jesus remains. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Here for you! We may run after His gifts, we may forget about the Giver, we may ignore Him, even reject Him.

Jesus remains. With you. Caring, calling, waiting. Always ready to embrace you, even if you come to Him bruised, broken and desperate, He will embrace you. He is always ready to forgive you, always ready to restore the relationships that our chasing after His gifts have broken. He remains with you.

We don't deserve such faithfulness, we can't appreciate it fully, we are not capable of rejoicing in it as it would be fitting, but He remains. Betrayed, but waiting. Despised, but waiting. Not needed, but waiting. Jesus always remains.

And He welcomes you. This was the third reason why the way Jesus advertised for His followers works. He welcomes you. What does this mean? We already reflected how Jesus cares for us, how He doesn't want His good gifts to stand between us and Him, the source of all good things.

We reflected how only Jesus remains, everything else, whatever important at the moment, fades away. It lasts only for a while. Jesus remains. And now, Jesus also welcomes you. Sure, He calls us to follow Him, we know that.

He speaks to us with His divine authority, His words are powerful, for they are spirit and life. He challenges us, our self-centredness, He pulls us out of our selfishness, He offers us to be a part of something so much greater, of His everlasting Kingdom.

Jesus is not only a teacher. He doesn't simply instruct us to do the stuff. He doesn't simply protect us from the desires of our own twisted hearts. To follow Jesus is not simply about becoming His student. He welcomes us. How?

Surprise! He adopts and embraces us into His family. How does He do that? In the most intimate and personal way. Taking home with you. Indwelling in you. Uniting you with Himself and with all His saints by means of His own Spirit.

He makes you His brothers and sisters. God the Father makes you co-heirs with Jesus. We can't even comprehend what it means, what it will mean for us, but this is true – you are co-heirs with Jesus.

God the Father has given everything to Jesus, and Jesus has chosen to share all He has with us. He has chosen to glorify and beautify you so much, that you will reign with Him in New Heavens and New Earth. He has welcomed you.

We don't get the grandeur of what this means. We seldom are grateful. Our joy of being Christians is so scant. But Jesus doesn't react as we would. He doesn't get offended. He doesn't turn away or withdraw His promises; they remain forever.

See, what Jesus says about following Him, it actually makes sense. Especially as we are reminded again and again of **His unceasing care**, of His faithfulness as **He remains with us**, and of the incredible privilege extended to us, that **we are welcomed into God's family**, destined to live with the Risen Jesus forever, in everlasting blessedness and joy.

How shall we advertise the Christian way? Let's stick with how Jesus Himself did it. Let's tell that Jesus demands from His disciples the highest allegiance, that He demands from us the firmest commitment, and unconditional faithfulness.

For He does. But, remember this little detail – He demands from us only what He Himself has given us first. For He has loved you above all things, He has committed to you in the firmest way, and there are no conditions that will drive Him away from you. There is no Master better than Jesus.

Let's strive to follow Him, not in our own power, but by God's grace, powered by His own Spirit.

Amen.