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Confirmation – Diocesan College (Bishops)
5 September 2010

Lk 14:25-33 – Good News Bible

Once, when large crowds of people were going along with Jesus, he turned and said to them, “Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and themselves as well. Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples.. If one of you is planning to build a tower, you sit down first and work out what it will cost, to see if you have enough money to finish the job. If you don’t, you will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation; and all who see what happened will laugh at you. ‘This man began to build but can’t finish the job!’ they will say. If a king goes out with ten thousand men to fight another king who comes against him with twenty thousand men, he will sit down first and decide if he is strong enough to face that other king. If he isn’t, he will send messengers to meet the other king, to ask for terms of peace while he is still a long way off. In the same way,” concluded Jesus, “none of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have.”

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is good to be back with you all, again, and especially to be here for Confirmations, which are always such glorious celebrations.

A new generation stands up to say ‘Yes, I choose to live God’s way’ with all his promises of blessing and hope lying before you.

Thank you, headmaster; thank you, everyone; for this invitation.

Visitors to Cape Town return home with many remarkable sites etched on their memories. Of course, there is Table Mountain, and the Waterfront, and now our beautiful stadium, as well as so much else.

But one of the strangest, and therefore, best remembered, sights, is the unfinished flyovers in the CBD – wide freeways that finish in mid-air.

The urban myths are many, as to how and why they came to be like this.

But as I think of them, I find myself questioning whether those who were responsible had read this morning’s gospel!

For whatever the reasons – they started a job and they did not finish it!

Jesus says, we are not to be like that in our Christian commitment.

He says – weigh up what is being asked of you; and then decide: either commit yourself wholeheartedly (or – to use the words of the great commandments, ‘with heart and soul and mind and strength’); or, he says, frankly don’t bother!

Following Jesus, he says, is not for sissies.

It's not the soft option.

It is for people who are prepared to give their all in striving for the best – and who won't settle for anything less!

And it is for people who believe that the way to know what is worth striving for, is to live God's way.

I suppose you could say that God our Father is the one parent who really does know best what is good for us!

So letting him call the shots is, in my view, the sensible way to go.

This is what Jesus means in the first part of our reading – saying that we should love him more than even our nearest and dearest.

Indeed, the Greek original puts it very strongly in the idiom of the day, 'Whoever does not hate his father and mother ... ' and so on.

Of course, there are days in every teenager's life when parents are entirely maddening!

But Jesus has something else in mind.

For he expects us to care for others around us with responsibility and commitment – to love our neighbours as ourselves, no less.

This is an essential part of the life of service, to which, together with worship and witness, those who are being confirmed pledge themselves today.

By putting Jesus first, we are saying that we want God's best not only for ourselves, but for those around us.

By following Jesus' example, by upholding Jesus' standards, we are in effect insisting on the finest example, the highest standards – undiluted excellence, and nothing less – for ourselves, for our families, our friends, and those around us in school, at work, in our communities, and our country.

Bishops boys have tremendous opportunities. Some of you will go on to become leaders in your chosen fields.

Yet ALL of you will have significant influence on others – the way you choose to live your lives will impact on everyone you meet.

So the question is, what impact do you choose to have?

Are you committed to being part of the answer, part of the solution?

Because, if not, then you run a high risk of being part of the problem!

Being part of the solution does not mean you have to be powerful and successful in the eyes of contemporary society – which puts too much store on status, wealth and fame.

Being part of the solution means that wherever you are, whatever your circumstances, you do the right thing: living with honesty and truthfulness; upholding the law (and that even means observing the speed limits!); promoting high standards and best practice, in whatever is your walk of life.

It means signing up for the sort of commitment that the Lead-SA challenge, being promoted in the media, is all about.

It is being generous to others, especially those with greater need, or lesser opportunities. It is actively striving for the best for our nation as a whole, and not pursuing blatant self-interest no matter at whose expense.

And at this point, I want to pay tribute to Mark Handley.

Powerful, rich or famous? These are generally not the fate of teachers!

But significant? Oh yes – significant far, far beyond our ability to measure – in the impact his life has had upon generations of boys.

His leadership of ‘The Epic’ is one area where we shall especially remember him, and give thanks for his life.

It has indeed been one of godly service:

- wanting the best for others;
- striving to bring out the best in others;
- working to lay foundations in others,

so that, beyond the classroom, beyond matric, and into the world, you would know how to look beneath the surface; beyond the superficial; and grasp what matters; and go on reaching for the best throughout your lives

You could say that he loved you best, through wanting the best for you.

I am sure that God’s words to him are ‘well done, good and faithful servant’.

Today our love and our prayers are with Sally, his family, and all who loved him and mourn his death.

We should not be afraid to grieve.

Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus – even though he would shortly call him back to life.

We know that Mark, Mr Handley, has gone to that promise of eternal life that is Jesus' gift to all who follow his ways.

But knowing this does not mean we should not weep.

Jesus said 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.'

Mourning – being honest about our sadness, about how much we have loved and lost, about how much we miss a friend, a colleague, a mentor, someone we looked up to and admired, and whose company we enjoyed – mourning all this is a way of expressing to God our deep, deep appreciation of a very special man.

And as we open our hearts to God in this way, we open ourselves to receive his comfort, his love, his reassurance, his strength, and his courage to go on living.

So, in our sorrow and grieving, we thank God for Mark Handley, and we pledge to honour him especially in this year's Epic.

In what the Epic stands for – in the way it challenges us to learn to see with fresh eyes, what is the right thing to do, and what it means to do it well – we find an echo of Jesus' challenge.

'Are you up for the Epic?' Grade 10s are asked.

'Are you up for following me?' the confirmands are asked by Jesus. 'Have you got what it takes, to say yes, and to see it through, for the rest of your lives?'

Well, we might at this point say to Jesus, it is all very well calculating the cost of building a tower, or indeed a flyover.

But we do not know what the cost of following Jesus is going to be!

So how can we calculate whether we can afford it!

While there are many areas in life where we do have choice, many events happen over which we have no control.

And what if Jesus calls us to follow him on difficult paths, asking us to make choices that we might not readily want to make?

I have no doubt that he is calling some of you to teaching, and some of you to ordination in the church – neither are an easy life of luxury, but both offering the promise of considerable significance and impact, on countless numbers of individuals.

Or perhaps in later years – or parents face this now – the choice arises between some bending of rules for the soft option, or holding out for what is right: total honesty in business perhaps, or more generally in one's dealings with others.

How do you know now, what Jesus is going to ask of you, and whether you will be able to meet the cost?

Indeed, at the end of the reading, Jesus said that if you follow him, it will cost you everything you have, and you must be prepared to give it all up!

That makes it sound a very bad deal!

But God is no businessman – he does not deal with us according to the strict provisions of contract law.

He deals with us on the basis of infinite love and generosity!

For although today in confirmation, Jesus asks us to say Yes to him – yes to living life his way; yes to letting him provide the answers to the decisions we have to take; yes to a life of witness, worship and service – today in confirmation, Jesus, and his Father in Heaven, with the Holy Spirit, say their Yes in return.

Yes, says Jesus – by the power of the Spirit, I will be with you in everything.

I will be your companion on life's journey. I will be the listening ear. I will be there for you to lean on – even a shoulder to cry on when you need it.

I do not promise that everything will go just the way you'd like it to – but I guarantee it will be a journey worth taking, a life worth living, of deep satisfaction and meaning; of significance not only for this life, but for all eternity.

And when I ask something hard of you, says Jesus, I will give you the strength, I will give you the resources you need. I'll never ask you to do something that is beyond you.

And when there are times when we mess up – as there inevitably are, in all of our lives, no matter how old we get, no matter whether we are Archbishops or not – Jesus is there for us.

No matter how often we fall, his patience is infinite – and when we are down, he stretches out his hand to us and waits, so that when we are ready to take it again, he will help us to our feet, help us brush off the dust, help us refocus on the path, help us take the next steps.

And no matter what, he will never leave us to cope alone.

So when it comes to counting the cost, I think the clearest picture is this – whatever life demands of you, God will put that amount into your account.

He will foot the bill.

We offer him all that we are – and he gives back everything we need – and more besides, because he prefers limitless generosity to balancing the bottom line.

Therefore, when we do our calculations, the answer is clear – we can dare to follow Jesus, we can dare to take up his challenge, we can dare to make the promises that are asked of us in confirmation, because he is the one who will make it possible to keep these promises.

So with joy and confidence, let us celebrate with the candidates today, who are now about to make their promises, and embark on a new journey, filled with all the blessings of God.

Amen