

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father, mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself cannot be my disciple.”

Surely, this sentence must rank as perhaps the hardest saying that Our Lord is recorded as having said. No, this is not an error. Jesus really said this. It's a strong statement and the word “hating” in this sentence is quite definitive. Every time I read Luke 14:26, I think to myself... *“I do not hate any of my family. Never have, and hopefully never will either!”* Are we really supposed to “hate” anyone?

It's worth beginning by noting that the Bible is, if nothing else, an endlessly surprising, if not at times also a rather odd book. How curious, for instance, to celebrate (as we Christians often do) the fact that Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to bless those who persecute us and yet this same Jesus in today's gospel advises hating our parents and spouse and children!!

So what does this startling comment actually mean? This is certainly a verse that has caused great confusion within the Church, and for very good reason too. How could Jesus have required hatred as a measure of discipleship when we are told that loving each other is how the world will know we are His disciples (John 13:35)? And consider this, family was extremely important to the Jewish people, as it is for all of us. Jesus seems to demand hatred, even toward one's parents, wife, children, and siblings— those whom we are specifically told elsewhere in Scripture to honour, protect, and love. Clearly, Our Lord, who summarised all of God's commandments as loving God and loving one's neighbour (Matthew 22:35-40), could not here have been demanding true hatred of one's family.

Does Jesus really call us to hate our biological families and our very lives? Two observations are helpful in this regard.

Firstly, the confusion is due to Our Lord's use of what was a common Jewish idiom. The word “hating” actually being a Jewish expression for “loving less.” Throughout the Bible there is a tendency to use the word “hate” when what is really meant is a secondary form of love, to love less, as it were. To love one person more

than another is described in the Old Testament as “loving one and hating another”. To give just one example, (there are many) in Deuteronomy 21:15 there are regulations for a man with two wives (one of whom is loved and one of whom is hated) the meaning is not that there is literal, visceral hatred per se of the second wife but more that the second wife is less preferred than the first.

Secondly, it is also true to say that Jesus is using hyperbolic language (deliberate exaggeration) here as he does frequently in his teachings. Just think of his call to cut off feet and hands and pluck out eyes if they cause us to sin as He said in Matthew 18:8-9, for example. This becomes clear when we compare this saying in Luke with its parallel in Matthew. St Matthew, is drawing on the same literary tradition as Luke, interprets the more stark language of “hate” to refer to primary allegiance and he puts it this way: *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”* The saying indicates that our primary allegiance must be to Jesus rather than to family. Jesus was not telling us to hate our family, but to love Him more than our own family.

Clearly then, the word ‘hate’, in the context of the gospel, is not the sin of hate. It’s not an anger welling up within us that causes us to lose control and say and do mean and cruel things. It is not an excuse to treat members of our family, or anyone else for that matter, with spite, harshness, malice or the like. It is not an excuse to let the passion of anger well up in us. On the contrary, it is a call from God to act in justice and truth and to refuse to allow anything to separate us from the love of God.

If it is money, prestige, power, the flesh, alcohol, etc., that separates us from God, then we must eliminate it from our lives. Sad but true, there will be some who will even find that they must distance themselves from their own family in order to keep their relationship with God alive. But even in this case, we are still loving our family. Love simply takes on different forms at times.

Although every human family is designed to be a place of peace, harmony and love, sadly the reality that many have experienced in life is that sometimes our family relationships directly interfere with our love of God and others. And if this is the case

in our lives, we must hear Jesus telling us to approach those relationships in a different way out of love for God.

Our Lord is asking us to recognise the greatest obstacles we have to our relationship with God. Who is it, or what is it, that tears us away from loving God with our whole heart. The words of Jesus today are words of encouragement urging us to be strong and calling us to put Him first before anything else in life. To do that, we must be ready and willing to distance ourselves from that which gets in the way of our relationship with God.

Dear People, as we meet Jesus in the Eucharist today, let our prayer be: Lord, help us to clearly recognise those things in our lives that keep us from loving You. Give us the courage to choose You above all things and give us the wisdom to know how to choose You above all things. Amen.