



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells
Cathedral, preached on Sunday 7 September 2025
by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.**

Further up and Further in – Discipleship and Transformation

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke chapter 14 and our Epistle to Philemon confront us with one of the most challenging themes in Christian life: the cost of discipleship¹. It's not a comfortable message, and it's easy to misunderstand. For Jesus says, rather disturbingly, "*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—cannot be my disciple*"².

To understand this, we must look back to Deuteronomy 33:8–9, where Moses blesses the tribe of Levi for putting their covenant with God above family ties. This refers to Exodus 32, where the Levites rally to Moses' side during the golden calf episode, even turning violently against their own families. But Jesus, who will later reject violence³, shifts the focus from swords to surrender: "*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions*"⁴.

Jesus's use of strong language—"hate"—is not meant to crush us with guilt. It's meant to disrupt us, to reorient our values and priorities. This is a "holy disruption," a radical reordering of relationships, social hierarchies, and identities, all for the sake of God's Kingdom. For anyone exploring or considering faith, this is crucial.

Importantly – *please hear me* - Jesus is not telling us to despise our families. That would contradict the commandment to "*honour your father and mother,*" repeated throughout Scripture⁵. In the Hebrew and Aramaic context, "*hate*"⁶ often means to "*love less*" not emotional hostility. Consider Genesis 29, where Jacob "*loved Rachel more than Leah.*" Leah is described as "*hated*"—meaning less

¹ One of the great Christian Teachers on this is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's [Cost of Discipleship](#)

² Luke 14:26

³ Luke 22:51

⁴ Luke 14:33

⁵ Exodus 20.12; Deuteronomy 5.16; Ephesians 6.2 and Colossians 3.20

⁶ Greek μισέω

loved, not despised⁷. The imbalance in Jacob's family leads to division and suffering. Jesus *isn't* calling for that chaos; Jesus *is* calling us to prioritise God above all.

In Luke 14, Jesus sets out the spiritual cost of discipleship: it demands everything—our time, relationships, self-image. To follow Christ is to allow every part of life to be reshaped. Our loyalty to God must come first, even over family – parents, wife or husband, children, siblings.

If Luke gives us the principle, Paul's letter to Philemon shows the practice. Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus, not as property but as a brother. Though Philemon had the right to punish him, Paul appeals "for love's sake," not command. Here we see discipleship reshaping power—not through coercion, but sacrificial love.

The Good News doesn't just reorder our relationship with God, but also with each other. Jesus calls us to place God above our closest human ties. Paul asks Philemon to place the Gospel above Roman social expectations. Onesimus is no longer a slave—he is family. Their relationship is reborn in Christ. Rowan Williams calls Paul's vision in Philemon "*The universal welcome*"⁸—a disturbing idea because it shatters hierarchies and redefines belonging.^{9 10}

This transformation can happen because here's the good news: this "cost" is not meant to weigh us down. Theologian Grace Jantzen reframes discipleship not as duty, but as grace-filled empowerment. Grace, she argues, doesn't crush—it heals, liberates, and empowers us to live Christ's radical call freely and joyfully. Hence her emphasising the importance of '*nativity*' and '*flourishing*' over '*mortality*' and '*finitude*'¹¹. In this light, the "cost" becomes a path to new life. I wonder if you have ever thought of discipleship as that which heals, liberates, and empowers us to live Christ's radical call freely and joyfully?

⁷ In her essay "*Rachel and Leah: The Appearance vs. Reality of Hatred, Jealousy and Deceit*", Rebbetzin Leah Kohn writes: "The Torah tells us that Jacob 'loved Rachel even more than Leah (Genesis 29:30)' and that, 'the Lord saw that Leah was hated (Genesis 29:31).' The first verse does not imply Jacob hated Leah, but that he had a deeper, natural connection to Rachel because, as explained above, their match was divinely ordained from the start."

⁸ Williams: *Meeting God in Paul*, SPCK, p27

⁹ Philemon 1.15-19

¹⁰ The mellifluous doctor, John Chrysostom - a 4th-century church father - recognized this. He admired how Paul set aside his dignity to advocate for Onesimus, embodying sacrificial love John Chrysostom Sermon 3 on Philemon found [here](#). Paul trusts Philemon: "*I know you will do even more than I say.*" This isn't just forgiveness. It's transformation—what Jesus calls each of us to.

¹¹ See Grace Jantzen *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* and *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*

Christian discipleship is not just about sacrifice, but rebirth. Jesus gently detaches us from our old selves to birth us into a new identity and a new community. The painful language—“*hate father and mother*”—can be seen as part of this birthing: disruptive, yes, but ultimately nurturing and life-giving¹².

And the reality is that if we are able to put God first then we will end up loving our families and our friends better. CS Lewis, as ever, put this with real clarity. He writes:

“When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.”^{13 14}

As we look at this, let’s not downplay what Paul is asking of Philemon. He isn’t just seeking forgiveness—he’s calling for revolution. To receive Onesimus as a brother, to free him, to love him—this would have disrupted the entire structure of Philemon’s household¹⁵. That is discipleship lived out. It overturns systems, breaks down barriers, and declares, “*There is neither slave nor free, for all are one in Christ Jesus.*”¹⁶

So what does this mean for us? Discipleship is not merely belief—it’s a reordering of our whole life. It might mean seeing someone we once resented as a sibling in Christ. It might call us to welcome the outsider; forgive the unforgivable; or release control. It means accepting grace’s holy disruption in our own lives. And we see this here and now as Alfie and Fin join us as Ministry Experience Scheme students, living alongside us as they explore God’s call. Their presence reminds us that vocation grows in community, through shared worship, service, and learning to follow Christ together with open hearts.

Discipleship means being willing to walk into the unknown—where cultural norms may resist, where family may not understand, but where Christ leads.

¹² This theme is developed beautifully in Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle ages*

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 248.

¹⁴ This resonates with Gregory of Nyssa’s mystical theology in which he sees the spiritual life as an ongoing transformation. For Gregory, grace isn’t just pardon—it’s power. It moves us into deeper communion with God and therefore with others.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa *The Life of Moses*. “*The Christian life is a continual becoming, for one never arrives at perfection in this life but is always advancing toward it. Grace is the divine energy that moves the soul onward, renewing and perfecting it.*”

¹⁶ Galatians 3.28-29

As Teresa of Ávila taught, “*The path of perfection is the path of love. Where there is love, the soul finds delight even in sacrifice.*”¹⁷ Discipleship, rooted in grace, transforms both individuals and communities.

So, let us embrace the cost not as a burden, but as joy. Let us, like Philemon, go even beyond what is asked—not because we must, but because we are freed by love which nurtures and sustains. This is a truth revealed throughout our ancient Judeo-Christian tradition. As the Zohar’s¹⁸ mystical writings, puts it, wisdom (*Shekhinah* – that is the presence of God in creation) and love are central: “*The Shekhinah is the secret of the Holy One’s light in the world, the mother who nurtures and sustains all creation.*”¹⁹ This is the grace-filled hope we share as Christians.

In *The Last Battle*, the final book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis gives us a vision of that grace-filled future. As the characters enter Aslan’s country, the Unicorn cries out:

*“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!”*²⁰

The Unicorn then gallops ahead, and to everyone’s astonishment, they all find they can keep up. They run faster and faster, yet no one tires.

This is the life of grace: disruptive, demanding, but joyful. A life where we are empowered, not exhausted; loved, not burdened. A life where loving God *first* means loving others *more*, not less. Where discipleship means grace-filled empowerment. Where the cost of discipleship leads not to despair, but to joy.

Friends, let us follow Christ—further up and further in.

Toby Wright, Dean of Wells

07 September 2025

¹⁷ Teresa of Ávila *The Way of Perfection*

¹⁸ Traditionally attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (2nd century AD), scholars now believe the *Zohar* was composed in 13th-century Spain by Rabbi Moses de León and others, blending ancient traditions with medieval mystical thought.

¹⁹ Zohar I:159a

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, Harper Trophy, 2000, pp. 195-197.