

## Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

7 September 2025

*"Letting Go: Embracing the Cross of Costly Discipleship in Today's World"*

*Preacher: The Revd. Nitano Muller, Canon for Worship and Welcome.*

*Readings: Jeremiah 18: 1-11, Luke 14:25-33*

Gracious God,

You call us to follow your Son with open hands and willing hearts.

Teach us to let go and free us from the fears, idols, and false securities we cling to.

so that we may take up the cross of Christ with courage and love.

By your Spirit, open our ears to hear your Word,

our hearts to receive your challenge,

and our lives to be reshaped in the likeness of Jesus,

in whose name we pray.

**Amen.**

### **Introduction:**

Like many during the pandemic, I decided to pick up a new skill and hobby. So, I joined a local pottery class as restrictions on our movement was being lifted. I watched Phil- the master potter “do his thing” and I was absolutely mesmerized, as his hands worked the clay on his wheel- sometimes pressing firmly, sometimes barely touching the spinning form. *'The secret,'* he told me, *'Isn't in making the clay do what you want. It's in letting go of what you think it should be.'* At one point, when a beautiful vase was beginning to take shape, he suddenly collapsed it back into a lump. I was upset, but Phil smiled. *'It wasn't right yet,'* he explained. *'Sometimes you have to let go of what's good to create what's truly meant to be.'* I recorded his words in my journal and I've thought often about Phil's words in the years since, particularly as I've reflected on today's challenging Scripture readings. We too are called to a profound “*letting go*”- one that makes space for God's transformative work in and through our lives.

### **Setting the scene:**

In our reading from Luke's Gospel today, Jesus makes what must surely rank among his most shocking statements: *'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.'* These are difficult words. They cut against our deepest instincts and

values. They disturb our comfortable notions of what it means to follow Christ. But perhaps that's precisely the point.

Jesus surely isn't advocating family breakdown or self-loathing in any literal sense. Jesus employs hyperbole, which would have been common-place in rabbinic teaching in first century Palestine- to convey the absolute nature of discipleship. He's asking for a reordering of our primary allegiances. ***To follow Christ means nothing can take precedence over that commitment- not even our most cherished relationships.*** This is what "letting go" means in its most profound sense: releasing our grip on everything we might cling to instead of the cross.

In Jeremiah, we encounter God as the potter, and we as the clay. The potter has complete authority to reshape and remake. The vessel must surrender to the potter's hands. There's deep vulnerability in this image, but also tremendous hope. The clay doesn't determine its final form- it must let go of any predetermined shape to become what the potter envisions. Similarly, our Christian discipleship involves surrendering our predetermined ideas of our lives and allowing God to reshape us according to God's divine wisdom.

Jesus continues with two pointed parables about counting the cost.

1. *A tower builder must calculate expenses before beginning construction.*
2. *A king must assess his military strength before engaging in battle.*

Both analogies emphasize the importance of unreserved, relentless commitment. That following Jesus isn't something we should undertake lightly or partially. Words echoed, even, in our ordination liturgies.

What, then, does Jesus mean when he concludes, '*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions*'? Is this a call to literal poverty? For some (especially those called to monasticism) throughout Christian history, it has been exactly that. But for many of us, I suggest that it's primarily about releasing our false securities- **those things we trust in place of God.**

Those things we place on the throne of our lives and put our trust in instead of God- financial stability, career success, social status, and technological solutions.

We build psychological walls of self-sufficiency.

Embracing ideologies and identities that promise safety and belonging. Don't get me wrong- None of these are inherently wrong, but they become problematic when they displace our primary call to follow the Jesus of the Cross.

The cross that Jesus invites us to pick up and carry is weighty precisely because it demands we release these alternative securities. It requires (*gesture*) **open hands, not fists clenched** around our possessions, positions, or our perspectives. And this, I believe, is the paradox of Christian discipleship- **that true security comes only through a profound "letting go"**.

To grasp the cross with both hands means that we must first release everything else we're holding. This is the practical meaning of Jesus's demand to 'give up all your possessions.' It's about opening our hands, hearts and minds and creating capacity for God's transformative work in our lives.

When Jesus speaks of 'hating' family, he employs Semitic hyperbole to establish a hierarchy of commitments. The Greek word used here -'*miseo*'- doesn't carry the emotional content we associate with hatred. Rather, it indicates preference or priority. Jesus is saying our commitment to him must be so primary that, by comparison, even our deepest familial bonds appear secondary.

This doesn't mean neglecting or devaluing family relationships. On the contrary, when properly ordered under our primary commitment to Christ, these relationships often flourish in healthier ways. But it does mean that other ties- like nationalism, political identity, or cultural norms and practices- cannot be our ultimate authority or source of meaning.

In our world marked by profound divisions: political polarization has intensified to the point where many find it difficult to engage respectfully with those who hold different views. Nationalistic sentiments are rising globally, often accompanied by a suspicion and/or hostility toward those perceived as 'other.' Anti-immigrant rhetoric has become increasingly normalized in public discourse. These divisions, dare I say, run counter to the kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

The challenge for us as Christians today is to resist being shaped *more* by these cultural forces than by the gospel. This requires a deliberate “letting go”- an unclenching of the fists and releasing our attachment to ideologies and identities that promise temporal security but ultimately diminish our capacity to love as Christ loved.

***Let me be clear:*** Christianity doesn't call for political apathy or demand we abandon all national identity. Instead, it asks that we hold these commitments lightly, recognizing their provisional nature compared to our primary allegiance to Christ and his kingdom. It asks that we examine ***all*** our attachments and ***all*** allegiances in the light of the gospel's call to radical love and inclusion.

Jesus's radical message challenges every form of tribalism and self-preservation. It confronts our tendency to create in-groups and out-groups. It questions our impulse to seek security through exclusion rather than embrace the vulnerability of inclusion. And in our current global and ecclesial context, embracing this message means allowing God to reshape our perspectives and priorities, as much as the potter reshapes clay on the wheel.

The increasing prominence of St. George's flag these last days offers a concrete example of the tensions Christians navigate today. What began as a symbol of England's patron saint- ironically, a man of Middle Eastern origin martyred for his Christian faith- has acquired complex and sometimes contradictory meanings. At sporting events, it represents shared national pride and unity. In other contexts, particularly when displayed alongside xenophobic rhetoric, it has become associated with exclusionary nationalism. As Christians, we might ask: *What does it mean to embrace the cross?* -the ultimate symbol of reconciliation across all boundaries- in a context where national symbols sometimes function as boundary markers? How might we honour legitimate love of country while ensuring it remains subordinate to our love of God and neighbour?

The answer lies in that fundamental posture of *letting go*- being willing to examine our attachments to symbols and narratives, asking whether they align with or impede our primary commitment to Christ and living a Christ-like life.

We must be willing to release even good things when they become the *ultimate thing* or when they are co-opted for purposes that contradict gospel values.

St. George himself was not an “ethnic Brit” but a multi-ethnic figure whose veneration crossed cultural boundaries. His story involves sacrificial courage in defence of the vulnerable- values that align with Christian discipleship rather than exclusion.

Embracing costly discipleship today might mean reclaiming symbols from those who would use them divisively. It might mean demonstrating that patriotism can be expressed through welcome rather than exclusion; service rather than self-interest; through honest reckoning with national failings rather than uncritical exaltation of perceived national virtues.

The potter reshapes clay not to destroy it but to fulfil its purpose. Similarly, the Holy Spirit’s reforming work in our national and cultural life isn’t about erasing identity but about reshaping it according to kingdom values- making it more inclusive, more just, more reflective of God’s expansive love.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to model a different way of engaging differences. Not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to abandon moral convictions or avoid difficult conversations. But to approach these conversations with humility, recognizing that our understanding is partial and that those with whom we disagree remain bearers of God’s image.

As we reflect on these challenging texts, we return to the image of the potter’s wheel. Like clay in the potter’s hands, we are called to a posture of surrender—releasing our preconceptions, our false securities, our lesser loyalties—so that God might reshape us according to divine wisdom.

Like my friend Phil the potter, sometimes we must let go of what’s good to create space for what’s truly meant to be. **Amen.**