

Editorial: Counting The Cost

It will not have escaped the attention of any of our readers who do the weekly shop or pay household bills that the UK is presently in the midst of a 'cost of living crisis', where the cost of gas, electricity, home heating oil and our daily necessities has sky rocketed in recent months. All too many have found themselves in the unenviable position of, not having money left over at the end of their month, but having month left over at the end of their money. As a result, the cost of living crisis has made people focus on what they can afford, what they are prepared to sacrifice in terms of luxuries or non-essentials, and what they simply cannot live without. These can be hard, even painful decisions to make, where sacrifices have to be made. And the same applies in the Christian life too, where we are called to 'count the cost' (Lk 14:28-30). It is to this subject I'd like to turn my attention in this editorial.

1. It COSTS to PROFESS faith. Many will know of Northern Ireland evangelists Trevor and Heather Gillanders. At the time they were considering the matter of their souls' salvation, they had asked their minister 'If we became Christians, would we have to give up all the things we enjoy, and make big changes in our lives? Their minister knew to say 'Yes' would make the Christian life sound like keeping a list of rules, whilst to say 'No' would make it sound like anyone could take the name of Christ upon them, but still live just as they pleased, which they couldn't. Their minister responded with a considered and wise response: 'It is good to count the cost.' There are things we did, places we went, and friends we hung out with *before* trusting Christ. Much may change thereafter, but in a wonderful way God gives us different, new and better pleasures. Jesus was open and honest with his followers – he told them they would be hated and persecuted (Matt 10:22 & 5:11-12) – but would yet enjoy a great heavenly reward when earthly service was done.

2. It COSTS to PROCLAIM your faith. As Christians we have been called to be 'ambassadors for Christ' (2 Cor 5:20) and to 'go and tell' (Mk 5:19 & Matt 28:7). Yet in a secular world, where outright antagonism towards the claims of Christ is on the increase, even sharing an unsolicited gospel witness where such may not be welcome can bring the 'sower' into hot water. Nailing your colours to the mast by agreeing with the Bible's teaching on a social issue may lead to your fitness to serve being called into question, if you are in public life. Things may be far from perfect in the United Kingdom, but yet compare the freedoms and liberties we have against dear believers in a country like North Korea, where publicly naming the name of Christ can lead to danger, imprisonment and even death. Considering the relative freedom we have here to share our faith, as God's witnesses (Isa 43:10) do we not need to be availing of this privilege 'while it is day' (Jn 9:4)? "... how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? ... faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Rom 10:14 & 17)

3. It COSTS to PROGRESS in your faith. The moment you trust Christ is but the beginning of your 'faith story'. Just like newborn babes, we need 'the sincere milk of the word' that we might not only grow, but grow strong (1 Pet 2:2). We are to study the Bible to show ourselves 'approved unto God' and able to 'rightly divide the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15), able to interpret scripture in the light of other scripture. We are to 'grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' (2 Pet 3:18) Jesus calls us to daily take up the cross, and follow Him (Lk 9:23). There is a cost to all these things, but there is reward too. '.. Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance (self control); and to temperance patience (perseverance); and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ ... if ye do these things, ye shall never

fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' (2 Pet 1:5-8 & 10-11)

4. It COSTS to PRAY. Have you ever purposed to have an evening time of prayer, only for the telephone to ring, an unexpected caller to arrive, or some mini-crisis within your house to kick off, demanding your immediate attention? Or, you make it to the planned quiet time, only for your mind to be flooded with thoughts about the day just past, or about all you plan to do tomorrow? Or, even worse, some ignoble thought enters your head? Now, of course, the devil isn't the author of every interruption, but I do believe he recognises the power of prayer, and will do all he can to keep the saints from praying, and from being effective in God's service. What has been called the 'tyranny of our schedules' will do little to help either. Praying is not always easy, nor is having a meaningful 'quiet time' – it takes determination and effort. As a young Christian I found the following words (from a hymn sadly rarely sung in our churches) by William Cowper both instructive and encouraging: 'Restraining prayer we cease to fight; / Prayer makes the Christian's armour bright; / And Satan trembles when he sees / The weakest saint upon his knees.' The reason for this is simple – when we in our weakness appropriate the power of Omnipotence through prayer, anything is possible (Lk 1:37). There *is* a cost to prayer, but this is more than compensated by the benefits flowing from it.

5. It COSTS immeasurably more to PERISH. John 3:16 has been called 'the gospel in a nutshell, and is quite possibly the most well-known verse in the whole Bible. It gives the priceless assurance of the love of God the Father, who spared not His own Son, that whoever would look to Him for salvation should not perish, but have everlasting life. There is a widespread misconception that heaven is everyone's default destination. Yet the reality is, if we want to be there, we must prepare and come by God's one appointed way, through Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). My favourite Sunday School teacher has oft testified of how he came to saving faith in Christ after being spoken to by the text in Hebrews 2:3 – '... How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?' Without Christ he knew there was no escape, just the bleakest prospect of a lost eternity. The chorus of a well-known gospel piece by J Hodge poses this probing question: 'Have you counted the cost, if your soul should be lost / Though you gain the whole world for your own?' Hebrews 11 details the exploits of a great many 'heroes of the faith' – men and women who counted the cost, and who believed the cost was worth paying. Men like Moses (to quote just one example): 'Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt ...' (Heb 11:25-26).

As we contemplate life, we will see that many of the most precious things in life involved counting the cost, and paying a price. The man or woman wishing to pursue a certain career will have had to apply themselves to their studies to gain the needed qualifications. The athlete or sportsperson striving to win will have had to apply discipline in terms of diet, exercise and other things. The couple planning to tie the knot, no matter how compatible or well-matched, will know that any marriage is but a union of two imperfect people, and will require commitment, dedication and a desire to make the union work. In the vital matters of faith and eternity, have you counted the cost? 'While the door of His mercy is open to you. / Ere the depth of His love you exhaust, / Won't you come and be healed, won't you whisper 'I yield, / I have counted, I have counted the cost.'" If you have made the Lord your choice, have you discovered the dividends flowing from praying, proclaiming and progressing your faith more than compensate for any cost – in terms of God answering prayer, using your witness to reveal Himself to others, and in drawing you into a deeper and closer walk with Him? God 'is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love' (Heb 6:10). He truly is no man's debtor.