

What, if I asked you— don't worry I'm not going to, but toy with this in the privacy of your own head— what is the hardest of Jesus' teachings? I know for some of you the answer might be 'is this supposed to be hard? I must have been doing something wrong' but please bear with me. It takes some of us— especially those of us in the pulpit and priestly petticoats— a while longer to reach the heights of sanctity than others. I also sometimes worry that there may be one or two of you who might be thinking 'Jesus? Oh, that's what this is about.' But let's assume that's just me worrying. So, What is the hardest of Jesus' teachings?

Is it...

*Do not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox or ass*

*Women do not speak in church*

*Render service with enthusiasm*

*Do not bear false witness against your neighbour.*

*Be a cheerful giver*

*Wives, be subject to your husbands*

None of the above, of course, because the preceding are Moses and St Paul.

Enough trick questions. The following *are* Jesus teaching, all from St Matthew's gospel.

*Sell everything you own and give the money to the poor*

*If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek*

*Give to everyone who begs from you*

*Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me*

*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away*

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*

Let's be honest: that lot makes St Paul sound easy. These are hard teachings indeed. And yet, I think, yet again, in response to the question 'What is the hardest of Jesus' teachings? the answer would have to be 'none of the above'. I think the hardest of his teachings is what we heard in the gospel today. This:

*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;*

In Luke's Gospel, as so often, Jesus is even more uncompromising with this teaching.

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters... ..cannot be my disciple.*

This is not family first. It's *hate* your family. That's a hard teaching. Because if your family fulfils its ideal role you will have people around you who love you, you will have people around you to support you unconditionally you will be helped to bear the results of those other hard commandments: poverty, submission, humiliation. You can bear so much if you have the support of your family. And Jesus wants you to *hate* them?

Admittedly, for some people this doesn't sound like an especially hard teaching: they already hate their family. It's not uncommon. At the very least, most of us have family members that, if hate would be going too far as a description of our feelings, well we wouldn't go anywhere near them were they *not* family members: the great aunt who tells you you've put on weight every time you see her at Christmas; the cousin who bangs on about foreigners at every baptism; the other cousin who married a salvationist; the grandparent who refuses to introduce your life partner as anything other than your 'friend'; the sister in law who charges her own father rent to stay in her house; the self-righteous socialist tofu-eating LGBT Anglican—no, that one's OK. Anyway, that's my family album: there will be one or more photos in your own that you'd, perhaps linger on less lovingly as you're leafing through your memory book. However, already loathing those who share at least half your DNA doesn't get you off Jesus' hook. Almost everybody who for whatever reason finds themselves outside of the biological family system have what are called chosen (or sometimes found) families- emotional if not biological nearest and dearest, and these will do just as well for inclusion in this teaching.

Whatever the precise wording of the teaching says I think it would be fair to say that it shouldn't be understood as suggesting that those who have spent thirty years prosecuting a furious family feud are following Jesus' teaching and doing God's work. It's not the relationship to the family *per se* that's the focus: that's really just the shock factor to make the point stick. Let's stick with out train of thought a little bit longer before we get to that point.

Families are a fundamental building block of all societies and cultures: they are foundational to social cohesion and individual well being. They are one of the elemental social structures, the way life is structured. And more than that: unlike other such structures that make up human societies like religion or education, social class or gender roles, people actually consciously *like* families. For the vast majority of us, we have an enormous emotional investment in our family; we are ferocious in

its defence, privilege it over all other connexions in our lives. Families, biological or chosen, are for very many of us the centre of our lives. Pretty much every funeral I take the eulogy stresses how much the departed loved their families, and they did. Absolutely no doubt. So much do families matter to humans that we very often co-opt them into our religious beliefs, they become a thing to be venerated, a gift from God. We get super-emotional about our families: families matter to us.

But— and here comes the point— families are of this world, and thus, families are temporary. Families are central to this world, and this world is passing away. The kingdom of Heaven is at hand, when all is transformed.

However strong the kinship bond, there comes a time when everyone must leave their family coach; there comes a time when a final date is added to the individual's entry in the family bible, there comes a time when the ties of kinship fray and break. It is a truth that is bleak, and full of grief, but no less a truth because it hurts.

There is one bond, however, that can never be unbound, one bond that is stronger than death, one tie that is never loosed, a hand that never lets go and a heart that never stops and never stops loving.

That hand and that heart belong to the one that has given us this teaching:

*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 love so many feel in, of and for their families, whether biological or chosen, is strong and real. Yet that love is a mirror-glint reflection of the love of God. All our human love has its source in the origin of love; the first person that loved us; the person that loved us, our families, everyone who ever lived and everyone who will ever live, the person that loved all creation into being. And we should, must, can only love that love most of all.