

Sunday 4th September 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #1 ‘The Cost’

In October 2019, the long-running Channel 4 show Grand Designs aired what many viewers have called its ‘saddest ever’ episode. For those of you who don’t watch the show, it follows people who aim to build their dream home – often very ambitious projects, with very striking (what you might call) ‘marmite’ designs: you either love them or hate them!

The particular show in question featured Edward and Hazel Short, who were attempting to build a new home called Chesil Cliff House, designed on the theme of a lighthouse on the North Devon coastline. What made the project all the more risky is that the couple – who were living in a large £1.4 million family home with their two children when they took the project on back in 2011 – were planning to knock their own home down, live in temporary accommodation during an 18-month build process, and then move in to their dream home on the same site. Even Kevin McCloud, the presenter of the show, admitted that what they were trying to do was ‘bonkers’.

... and the project started to go wrong almost from the start. The scale of the house on an unstable cliff edge meant drilling foundations extra deep into rock, which the builder described as the hardest he’d ever had to drill into. The double-dip recession of 2012 meant that Edward’s financial agreement with the bank fell through. Fortunately that meant they didn’t actually knock their existing home down until 2016, by which time the new plan was to build two homes: one to live in and then the lighthouse to sell. The programme eventually began tracking the project in detail in 2018 and aired the programme in 2019, 8 years after the project began. What viewers saw was a shell: the frame of a magnificent building, but totally unfinished. (I showed the picture as the backdrop to our bible reading.) Even Edward admitted it was, in its current state, ‘an eyesore’.

Tragically the project had also taken a huge personal cost: Edward was now £4 million in debt and he and Hazel had separated. Edward’s dream had cost him not just his financial security, but his marriage and family. At the end of the programme he admitted with classic British understatement: ‘Sometimes I wonder if I might have been a bit ambitious.’

Edward Short’s story is **a perfect illustration of something Jesus observed 2,000 years ago**, and which forms the heart of our text for today (vv28-30): ‘Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, “This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.”’

It’s common sense, isn’t it? But Jesus isn’t talking about buildings for their own sake, though I wonder what might have happened if Edward had heard Jesus’ words; no, **what he’s talking about is the life of faith, of what it really means to follow Jesus. And his advice is simple, but challenging: weigh it up.** Be realistic: look at what it will mean to follow me. Because to follow me is life-changing, it will mean giving yourself whole-heartedly to me. If you’re only half-in, you’ll quit. From now on, everything of yours is mine.

Let’s be clear that he’s *not* saying that to follow him will automatically mean we’ll give everything away and live penniless. But what it does mean is that our hearts are fully surrendered to his will, so that nothing – nothing – in our lives is held back. If Jesus asks us to do something, we’re ready to do it.

It also means that the person we love most in this world is Jesus. Not our mum or dad, not our children, not even our husband or wife or partner. They all come second to Jesus. This is probably the hardest bit, isn't it? But it's the clear meaning of what Jesus says in the first part of the passage (READ). But, and this may sound strange, the effect of it is liberating. I know that I am only the second most important person in Alise's life, just as she knows she is the second most important person in mine. Jesus is first.

The reason this is a good thing is that we're not totally reliant on our human relationships, which can only ever be for this life. Once we're with the Lord forever in glory, and made completely whole, none of us will be married, which as it happens is one of our passages for later in this series. Important as our human relationships are – and of course we need each other and love each other, Jesus knows this just as much as we do, he also said this plenty of times too – they are not the be all and end all. Indeed **they all find their true place in our wholehearted surrender to Jesus**.

Why is Jesus saying all this? It's a pretty strange marketing strategy, isn't it? It sounds like he's trying to put people off? ...And in a funny way, he is. Our text today begins with these words: 'Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them, he said...' The key thing here is to understand why Jesus was so popular. They thought he was going to be a political liberator, that it was going to be victory over the Romans, and the restoration of national power and prosperity, (back home in time for tea and medals). It was a goodtime gospel, a gospel of success – and Jesus is saying to them: you don't understand, you've totally misunderstood what I've come for. I'm offering you selfless service not success, humility not pride, welcome for outsiders not crushing your enemies, giving up your rights not pandering to your prejudices, ultimately to find true life by releasing your life to me. Is that what you're up for? Weigh it up.

It was a hard message then, but we know the outcome: thousands of people followed Jesus into Jerusalem a few months later, but four days later it was only 11; a few hours after that it was 3, and then it was none. Even after the resurrection, the group Jesus left numbered 120: 120 who had weighed it up, and said yes to Jesus. But that 120 was enough to change the world.

And it's the same today. **It's a hard challenge for us to hear: but to those who say yes, to those who have ears to hear it, and give themselves wholeheartedly, Jesus is just as able to fill with his life**. You see, it's not about us. It's about him. Those who come to me, Jesus says, I will never drive away. If you weigh it up and say yes, then you will find the true source of life. And yes, it will be hard, have no illusions about that: but there is *no better way*. Follow me, apprentice yourself to me, and find life, life in all its fullness.

There is a postscript to the lighthouse: early last month it was, amazingly, finally completed and put on the market for £10m. If it sells, Edward will clear his and ex-wife's debts. It turns out, after all, that Edward was able to complete it, though I suspect he would never have agreed to the cost had he known what it was. Our great God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is not calling us to do what Edward did: but he *is* saying to us today – weigh it up. Only we're not relying on banks and drills and buyers, but on the unlimited resources of Jesus Christ. He wants everything: but he *has* everything, too, and longs to release the inexhaustible resources of heaven to each of us. Will we hear that call today? Will we give ourselves wholeheartedly to Jesus?