

Text: Jeremiah 18: 1-11 & Luke 14: 25-33

Sermon: Allegiance to Christ

Prologue – Football

Well, this year marks a special anniversary for me — not my birthday (I'm older than that), but another milestone altogether. It was back in 1985 that I was taken to an event that would quietly, but profoundly, change my life. My dad took me to the Hawthorns - home of West Bromwich Albion - for my first ever live football match.

I remember it vividly. It was a local derby against Aston Villa, and Albion won 1–0. Before the match, I was already a keen follower of football but during those 90 minutes, something shifted. I walked out of that ground having - without quite realising it - sworn allegiance to West Bromwich Albion football club. And once you do that as a football supporter, there's no going back. You don't switch clubs. That's a no-no.

Because when you swear allegiance to something, it creates a powerful bond, one that, if deep enough, can shape your life. And it's that idea of allegiance, and being shaped by the one we follow, that lies at the heart of our readings today, from Jeremiah and Luke.

Discipleship in Luke

Luke's account of Jesus with the large crowd is, to put it mildly, uncompromising. This isn't a soft recruitment drive, full of promises and perks with the fine print hidden away. Quite the opposite. Jesus lays it all out: the cost, the commitment, the seriousness of what it means to follow him.

And what he says is frankly shocking. The call to "hate" father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself, sounds unnatural, unethical, and at complete odds with so much

of what we know to be good and godly. It seems to contradict the fifth commandment itself: “Honour your father and mother.” And throughout the Scriptures Jesus knew and fulfilled, family and life is held in high regard.

So how do we make sense of this?

Well Jesus often spoke in extreme language, hyperbole: exaggerated statements not meant to be taken literally, but designed to shock us awake. Perhaps only the language of “hate” with all its discomfort, could convey just how demanding the call to the Kingdom truly is. ‘Jesus’ demand for loyalty is that strong, that focussed, that the only way to express it is through language that feels, quite frankly, offensive.

And then comes the mention of the cross; but that part was very literal. People in that crowd would have known exactly what it meant to see someone carrying a cross, flanked by Roman soldiers. It was a death march. And perhaps it was only those who were still listening after the “hate your family” line were ready to hear that next part.

Swearing allegiance to Jesus meant being prepared to take up your own cross - literally. It meant walking a path that could cost you everything.

And I wonder: if you or I had been in that crowd, would we have joined up? Or run a mile in the opposite direction?

The Potter and the Clay: shaped for service

If Luke gives us the stark invitation to follow Jesus with total allegiance, then Jeremiah offers us a glimpse of what happens after we say yes. The image of the potter working at the wheel is one of the most tender and honest pictures of discipleship in all of Scripture. It’s not about perfection. It’s about process.

Jeremiah watches as the potter's first attempt doesn't go to plan. The sculpture is flawed but the potter doesn't throw it away in frustration. He begins again. He reworks the clay into something new, something good. And that's the heart of God's shaping work in us.

Discipleship isn't a one-time event. It's not a single moment of decision followed by instant transformation. It's long-term, it's messy; it involves being placed on the wheel repeatedly, especially when life throws challenges our way, or when we get things wrong - and we do get things wrong! We resist, we crack, we wobble. But the potter doesn't give up.

One of the ways we go off course is when our allegiance to Jesus - and to the Gospel he proclaimed - gets quietly replaced by other allegiances. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus described in parables and embodied in his ministry, is radical, inclusive, and deeply challenging. But it's also easily overshadowed by forces at work in our culture and society.

Sometimes, without realising it, we begin to pledge ourselves to other visions of the world, ones that make us wonderful promises but don't reflect the heart of Christ. These rival allegiances can be subtle. They creep in through culture, politics, even religion and before we know it, the Gospel gets altered or diluted. The clay starts to harden in the wrong shape.

Allegiance and the flags we fly

Apart from football, another powerful force that calls for our allegiance is our country — our nationality — often symbolised by a flag. Now in recent months, the presence of flags hung from lampposts and painted in islands has stirred deep emotions across communities. There is controversy and there is fear.

I've spoken with people who have put up flags because they feel anxious about the pace of change in their communities . For them, the flag is a symbol of belonging, of rootedness, of identity. I've also spoken with others who are fearful of what motivates some - and I stress, some - to display these flags. They worry that behind the flag lies a message of exclusion, or even hostility.

Whatever we may think of the flags, as Christians our first allegiance is not to a symbol, a nation, or a cultural narrative, it is to Christ and to the message he proclaimed. The Kingdom of God is not defined by borders or flags, but by love, justice, mercy, and welcome. And our calling is to replicate that love in our lives, especially towards all people

Our very own Bishop of Aston, Eston Pryor, put it like this:

“As the Church of England, we have a particular calling to care for all who live within our parishes - whatever their view in these debates: to welcome the newcomer, to affirm those who have long called our communities home, and to speak out against all forms of prejudice. This is not an easy task. It requires courage, discernment, and care, both in speaking truth and in ensuring the safety of our colleagues and parishioners.”

And of course we don't always get it right.

That's why we need the potter's hands time and time again to remould us, to set us straight, to shape us not into what the world wants, but into the people God created us to be.

New season

So here we are in a new season, not just for football, but for our Church. A fresh chance to lace up, step out, and offer ourselves to be remoulded by the hands of the Potter. But the call of Jesus is serious, it asks for our full allegiance, and not just on Sundays.

But it's also full of grace: we're not expected to get it right first time, or every time.

What matters is that we resist hate, fear, or division and commit wholeheartedly to the way of love, the way of Christ, despite the costs. Because when we do, we're shaped not by the Opposition's tactics, but by being part of Jesus' disciples - and that, my friends, is a team worth joining. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes 7 September 2025 12th Sunday after Trinity