Jesus says something in today's gospel which is mostly either ignored or misunderstood. When he says: 'If anyone comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple', we should not take the 'hate' literally, in the sense that we understand it. Jesus is not demanding that we hate our family – that would be grotesque – but he *is* saying that if we choose to follow him, we must do so with the whole of ourselves. He is using an exaggerated metaphor – hyperbole – to make this point. The medieval German Dominican Meister Eckhart said: "Why do you speak about God? Everything you say is a lie." It's the same thing: he didn't literally mean that whatever you say about God is actually a lie, he mean that it falls so far short of the truth it's more like a lie.

The word 'hate' in in this gospel reading deserves a closer look. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the contrast between 'love' and 'hate' is sometimes used to communicate preference. For example, in dealing with inheritances in polygamous marriages, the Mosaic Law referred to 'two wives, one beloved, and other hated' (Deuteronomy 21:15, KJV). This is a literal translation, but it actually has to do with *preference* – one wife was preferred over another for practical purposes, not in feelings. The Mosaic Law wasn't talking about emotional hate, only legal preference.

All the old textbooks of prayer used to say – and sometimes still do – '*prefer* the love of no creature to the love of God' – as if the Creator was in competition with the creature for its love. We are very well able to love God *in and*

through our families, friends, through other people. If we can't do that, how do we love God? In what way? In a vacuum? Julian of Norwich called other people – and the saints, too – intermediaries who are our way and means of loving God. More than this, they are our way and means of thanking God – and Meister Eckhart also said that if the only prayer we ever say in our life is 'thank you', that would be enough.