

“LIVING DAILY FOR JESUS”

Luke 9:18-27

Harvest Festival is a time for thanksgiving, for remembering the good things that God has done for us and provided for us during another year. We have expressed that in our songs and prayers this morning. It's also a time when we commit all that we are and all that we have to God for another year. I suppose in recent times the idea of thanksgiving has rather eclipsed the aspect of commitment. When God first spoke to his people about the way they were to order their society after their liberation from Egypt, he told them to give the first fruits of their harvest to him as a way of saying thank you, but also as a recognition of their dependence on him and their willingness to work and live for him.

We have other occasions, of course, when we express our dedication to God – at New Year, maybe. Sometimes we do it at Pentecost, and we use liturgies such as the Methodist Covenant Service and the new Baptist Covenant service to express that. From time to time there might be an opportunity to respond at the end of a Sunday service or after a baptism. But for most of us the act of committing ourselves to Christ to be used as he wants is a somewhat occasional office. Jesus makes it very clear, though – and it's re-emphasised in the rest of the New Testament – that the Christian life is a life of complete and constant commitment.

Jesus makes the point very strongly in the words we've just read from Luke's gospel. The path of discipleship is not an easy one. In fact, you may remember, there were those who actually gave up following Jesus because the demands were too high. John tells us about them in *John 6:60ff*. It's always tempting to assume that the glib slogans we so often use in our evangelism – “Jesus is the answer”, “Come to Jesus and see your problems disappear” – are the whole story. Yes, Jesus is there to help us, but, as many of you could testify this morning, the problems certainly don't disappear. The Christian life is not a bed of roses.

What Jesus says here is reported by Matthew, Mark and Luke. Interestingly, Luke adds a word that the others omit. Jesus declares that anyone wanting to join him must take up their cross and follow him. That's tough talk. But Luke adds the little word “*daily*”. This is certainly not a one-off commitment – it's on-going and in deadly earnest. You don't simply walk to the front of the church once a year and assume that you've done your duty. Jesus expects a whole lot more than that. As we saw earlier in the year when we looked through the little book of *Malachi* in the Old Testament, most of us are prepared to give everything we've got to our jobs or our families or our leisure activities, and if he's lucky God can have any leftovers. What he says here is “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*”

1. A CONSCIOUS DECISION

Jesus talks here about people wanting to follow him, people making a decision to live a Christian life. It's not something you drift into, or you're born into (although that can help), or that you leap into as some kind of purely emotional response. Of course, emotion may be involved. But having made the decision, we are to “*take up the cross*”. There's an act of will involved. You actually decide that you're going to go for it.

Many people think they can be Christians when they feel like it. If it's a good day and there won't be too many points of opposition, then they can go along with it all. But if it gets a bit tough, then forget it. They'll go with the flow and maybe pick up the Christianity bit again on Sunday. You can't live the Christian life like that. Jesus says you've got to make that decision “*daily*”. Each morning you need to make that decision to follow Christ today. This morning we have brought here symbols of our own daily lives, things that represent something of what we do each day. And we have offered them to God as a

way of saying, “Take all that I am and have and use it for your glory.” I hope we’ve meant it. But we really need to be doing that every day, to remind ourselves of who it is we are following, who we are living for. Each morning we should be consciously taking that decision to live for Jesus that day. Don’t just drift through it all thinking that a once a year commitment is enough. Jesus says “*daily*”.

2. AWARE OF THE CONSEQUENCES

It would not have been uncommon during the Roman occupation of Palestine to have seen people walking along the streets to the outskirts of the city carrying crosses. Tens of thousands of people were executed by crucifixion during their rule. But if you saw someone carrying a cross, it could mean only one thing – death. There was no other reason to be carrying it. Anyone who picked up a cross was on their way to die. The power of that image may be lost to us today, but it’s clearly what Jesus was trying to communicate here. Following him, that conscious act of commitment, is an act of complete self-denial.

Indeed, Jesus stresses that point in what he says next. There’s no point trying to live only for yourself, he says: in the end it’s a futile attempt. If you take seriously the demands of Jesus, then you are recognising that everything is up for grabs. You need to be prepared to lose everything that the world thinks is worthwhile if you are truly going to live the Christian life. Now that’s hard stuff to swallow. Maybe most of us here cannot really grasp that. After all, the likelihood that we will die for our faith in Jesus Christ is remote. But look at the situation of those aid workers in Afghanistan. Consider the thousands of believers in countries where the ruling regime is opposed to Christianity. Think of those people who have lost their livelihoods because they have refused to compromise with corrupt or unethical business practices. Remember those who have been thrown out of their families or communities because they have taken a stand on the word of God. If you are looking for an easy ride, then following Jesus is not for you.

3. FOLLOWING JESUS

But the answer is in the last part of this sentence. We are to commit ourselves daily to a life of self-denial because we are following Jesus. This way of life is an option for us because Jesus has already done it. We are following in his footsteps. Jesus wasn’t saying this lightly. Even though his listeners were not yet aware of it, Jesus knew that he himself was going to have to carry a cross – and he was going to be nailed to it until he was dead.

Whatever other gifts we are thanking God for this morning, the greatest gift is that of his own Son Jesus, a gift symbolised for us in the bread and wine of communion. And it is that which gives us the motivation to commit ourselves to him. If we are daily to dedicate our lives to Christ, then daily we must remind ourselves of his love, daily we must respond to his awesome love. Yes, the consequences are scary. Yes, it is an enormous demand on our commitment. But just pause to think what Jesus has done for you. Remind yourself that he left the glory of heaven for you, that he was hounded and humiliated for you, that he was nailed to a cross of wood for you.

But remember, too, that you follow him through death and out the other side. Jesus was brought back to life. His death was not the end. And those who commit themselves to follow him will eventually share in his glory, will enjoy the splendour of heaven. That’s where the path of discipleship ends. But there’s a lot of it to tread in this life first. Are you up for it? Jesus died for you. Will you offer yourself to him day by day? The prayer of Richard, the 13th century Bishop of Chichester, (which was put into that song from *Godspell* – “*Day by day*”) says, “*O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day.*”