

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 17”

Matthew 8:18-27

Last week we saw Jesus starting to exercise his ministry of healing and miracles. After the stories of his birth and the baptism and temptations that ushered in his ministry, we've looked at his preaching – the Sermon On The Mount, in which he set out for his followers what living the life of the Kingdom was all about, what it meant to follow the Kingly Messiah – and we've looked at the way in which he began to demonstrate in his own actions what the Kingdom of God looks like, and began to show something of the authority with which he was going to act. Now he starts to make it real for his followers, too.

In the passage we've just read, there's a strong contrast between what the NRSV Bible calls "*The Would-Be Followers*" and the authentic followers of Jesus. Matthew picks out two people who come to Jesus and volunteer to be his disciples. The first is a "*teacher of the law*", one of the very people who will oppose Jesus most openly and vehemently as his ministry progresses. On this occasion, though, he seems to be sincere in what he says, offering to "*follow [Jesus] wherever he goes.*". The trouble is, Jesus senses that he hasn't really thought it through and points out that life for his followers will be one of sacrifice, uncertainty and deprivation. Jesus will be following a very nomadic lifestyle, without any real guarantee even of accommodation. The clear implication is that this man does not persist in his desire to follow Jesus. For one thing, there's no mention of him ever again.

The second person is already referred to as a disciple, but quite how fully he is a part of Jesus' small group of disciples is not clear. However, he tells Jesus that he isn't quite ready for the total commitment that Jesus asks of him. He asks if he can go off and bury his father. Now there are two schools of thought about this. It was a clear part of the Jewish Law that the burial of a father took precedence over pretty well everything else. So Jesus could well be saying something that is quite shocking in its uncompromising call to commitment: he could be telling this man that following him takes precedence over even the responsibility of a son towards his father. That is something to consider, especially in the light of some of the other things Jesus says about the way in which those who truly want to follow him should view their family ties.

But another way of thinking about this is that this phrase "*bury my father*" refers to the way in which children were often tied to their parents until they died. There are several references in ancient literature people using this phrase as a way to indicate that they were unable to commit themselves to anything while their father was still alive. So this may even be an attempt at an indefinite putting off of a full commitment to Jesus. Either way, Jesus is making it clear to this man that commitment to him overrides every other commitment, even that of family. And he says, quite directly, "*Follow me*". Once again, we get the impression that this man did not want to follow. The commitment was too great and the cost was something that neither of these men had really thought through.

The next sentence, though, comes in complete contrast to this. In most versions of the Bible, there's a section break between v22 and v23, so the contrast is sometimes lost on us. But Matthew tells us that Jesus got into the boat that was on the shore "*and his disciples followed him*". This group of men did actually bite the bullet and they followed him. Of course, this group of disciples was not yet the twelve we tend to think of as the disciples – for one thing, Jesus hadn't yet called them all. Matthew himself isn't called until 9:9 and the full list doesn't come until after that (10:2-4). But these are the men who have heard The Sermon On The Mount, who have been left in no doubt what life as a follower of the Kingly Messiah is all about. And now they start to put it into practice: now they actually begin to follow.

What is interesting, though, is how and where they follow. Although these men have shown themselves prepared to give up everything for Jesus, they still have their fishing boats and still return to their day jobs from time to time. Throughout the gospels we read of them out fishing or sailing on the Sea of Galilee. And here Jesus asks them to follow him in their everyday situation. They're not following him into the synagogue or the Temple. This isn't a prayer meeting or an outreach event. This is their everyday

working environment. It's what they're used to, their own familiar context as working fishermen on the lake. And as they follow Jesus, he is obviously with them in that.

Unfortunately, as soon as they put out onto the lake, a violent storm erupts. It wasn't unusual for this to happen. The Sea of Galilee is a long way below sea level and is surrounded by hills which funnel the winds across the lake – and those winds can get up strength very, very quickly. But it pretty well always happened without warning. And this is a particularly violent storm. The Greek word used here is “*seismos*”, which you may be able to work out is usually used of earthquakes. And the men in the boat were very anxious about this, not because it was something unknown to them – but because it *was* known to them. They knew what happened when a storm like this kicked off on Galilee and they knew it spelt danger. That's why they were so afraid.

And in their fear they call on Jesus, who is sleeping peacefully in the back of the boat. His presence with them in the difficulties of their everyday environment can help them cope with their anxiety. Indeed, his presence not only calms them down, but calms the storm as well. Jesus stands up and shouts at the storm, telling it to calm down – and it does! Jesus' being there in that situation makes an astonishing difference.

In fact, the disciples are astonished. They look at each other in amazement and say, “*What kind of man is this?*” Well, when you stop and think about it, the only answer to that question is really, a man who is God. This is a man who shows his authority even over the forces of nature. But for the Jews, it was more than simply the forces of nature. For the Jewish people (and remember, Matthew is writing this gospel to help his new Jewish converts to realise that Jesus is very much the Messianic Son of God), the sea was a symbol of the forces of chaos and disorder. They were very afraid of the sea, the Jews, because it seemed that it was untameable and overwhelming. And in the Old Testament, it was a mark of the sovereignty of God that even the sea – that vast, chaotic expanse of constantly moving water – obeyed him. There are plenty of examples of that in the Old Testament, but here's just one: “*O LORD God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O LORD, and your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them*” (Psalm 89:8,9).

This, then, is Jesus responding to the faith of those who have followed him and taken him into their everyday situations. In a sense, that is one of the marks of the authentic disciple. It's what we are called to do today. When Jesus works on our lives and calls us to follow him, he does not want our excuses and our get-out clauses. So often we are tempted to say the same things as those “*Would-Be Followers*” of vv18-22. And so often we use seemingly acceptable reasons – our family, our duties, our responsibilities – when that's just a cover for our own refusal to face up to the clear challenge of Jesus. Jesus wants to know that we are totally committed to him, completely ready to follow him.

And when we do, it's not in the church or in the big conferences and conventions that he most clearly shows his authority. It's in our everyday lives, in our everyday situations – at work, amongst our friends and neighbours, in the places where we spend our leisure time. Just as he called those first disciples to follow him out onto the lake, into their familiar, everyday situation, so he calls us to follow him in those places where we spend most of our time.

To what extent do you follow Jesus in your workplace, in your neighbourhood, in your sports club or gym? How aware are you of Jesus' being there with you? And, perhaps more to the point, how aware are others that Jesus is with you there?

It was in that everyday situation that these first followers of Jesus really experienced his power at work as he stood up and stilled that storm, as he demonstrated his credentials as the true Son of God, as the one and only Kingly Messiah. And, despite the occasions in the future when they might waver in their faith in or commitment to him, they had this evidence that Jesus would see them through even the most tricky situations. We too can have confidence in his protection and security if we are really prepared to follow Jesus wherever we are.

Jesus isn't just for the "spiritual" bits of our lives. Our service for him cannot be limited to the time we spend in church or on supposedly "Christian" things. Jesus calls us to follow him into every situation, into those places, alongside those people, amongst those problems where we spend most of our waking lives. We follow him there to make a difference, to model the values of his kingdom, to live out our commitment to God. And on those occasions when it all seems to be going wrong, when the great storms of life unexpectedly blow up in our faces, we can scream out to him, "*Lord, save us!*" – and he will respond. Give it a go this week. You won't regret it.

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There's a strong contrast here between "*The Would-Be Followers*" and the authentic followers of Jesus. Matthew picks out two people who come to Jesus and volunteer to be his disciples. The first is a "*teacher of the law*", who seems to be sincere in what he says, and offers to "*follow [Jesus] wherever he goes.*". The trouble is, Jesus senses that he hasn't really thought it through and points out that life for his followers will be one of sacrifice, uncertainty and deprivation. The second person is already referred to as a disciple, but tells Jesus that he isn't quite ready for the total commitment that Jesus asks of him. He asks if he can go off and bury his father. This either a literal request to sort out a funeral or a way of saying that he is unable to commit himself to anything while his father is still alive. But Jesus make it clear that commitment to him overrides every other commitment, even that of family. And he says, quite directly, "*Follow me*".

Then we read that Jesus got into the boat that was on the shore "*and his disciples followed him*". These are the men who have heard The Sermon On The Mount, who have been left in no doubt what life as a follower of the Kingly Messiah is all about. Now they start to put it into practice and actually begin to follow.

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In fact, the disciples are astonished. They look at each other in amazement and say, "*What kind of man is this?*" This is a man who is God. For the Jewish people the sea was a symbol of the forces of chaos and disorder. In the Old Testament, it was a mark of the sovereignty of God that even the sea – that vast, chaotic expanse of constantly moving water – obeyed him. Look at *Job 38:8-11; Psalm 65:5-8; Psalm 89:8,9; Psalm 107:23-32*.

It was in that everyday situation that these first followers of Jesus really experienced his power at work as he stood up and stilled that storm, as he demonstrated his credentials as the true Son of God, as the one and only Kingly Messiah. And, despite the occasions in the future when they might waver in their faith in or commitment to him, they had this evidence that Jesus would see them through even the most tricky situations. We too can have confidence in his protection and security if we are really prepared to follow Jesus wherever we are because Jesus isn't just for the "spiritual" bits of our lives. Our service for him cannot be limited to the time we spend in church or on supposedly "Christian" things. Jesus calls us to follow him into every situation, into those places, alongside those people, amongst those problems where we spend most of our waking lives. We follow him there to make a difference, to model the values of his kingdom, to live out our commitment to God.

Questions for discussion

1. Jesus makes it clear that his followers cannot expect the comforts of a settled existence. How does that fit in with our expectations today?
2. Jesus says in several places that our commitment to him must be greater than our commitment to our families. How do we reconcile that with our current emphasis on "family values"?
3. Clearly the disciples of Jesus didn't completely give up their "day jobs". What does that say about Jesus' expectations of our daily lives?

4. How can we see our daily work and routine as part of our calling to be followers of Jesus? In what ways can we encourage each other to see Jesus at work in our daily lives?