

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 20”**  
*Matthew 9:14-17*

I'm sure you've all heard those “light bulb” jokes from time to time. You know – How many pastoral counsellors does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has really got to want to change. How many surrealists does it take to change a light bulb? Fish. How many Baptist deacons or URC Elders does it take to change a light bulb? “Change!” What do you mean “change”?

Deep down, we're all pretty suspicious of change, I think. There's a kind of innate conservatism in all of us that prefers things the way they are, prefers the familiar, the comfortable, the way things have always happened – especially if everything is going fairly well. And that seems particularly to be the case when we do things together, which is probably why so many institutions are cautious about change – and, indeed, “institutionalised” is a word which has a slightly pejorative ring to it.

But this Kingdom that Jesus has come to announce and to inaugurate has change, transformation at the very heart of it. Jesus, the Kingly Messiah predicted and promised by God through the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, has come to make a difference. In one sense, he has come to return things to the way they were at the beginning, but so much stuff has happened in between God's creation of an originally perfect world and the situation in which humanity now finds itself that it will seem very much like change.

And this isn't just about tinkering around with things – a few minor adjustments to get things back on track – this is about a radical renewal of everything, everyone. Jesus' teaching in The Sermon On The Mount has given a very clear indication where he wants things to go. The way in which he has changed the lives of the various characters Matthew has so far described in his gospel – lepers, paralytics, those possessed by demons, the people he has called to be his disciples – has demonstrated that this isn't about sticking plasters and pain killers: this is about major reconstructive surgery, about starting all over again. And all those who consider following Jesus need to be very much aware of that, because if the institution is to change, each part of it, each person within it has to change.

Matthew introduces the issue with a question about fasting. Then, as now, some people used fasting – voluntarily going without food for a specified time – as a spiritual discipline, an opportunity to reflect on God and what he had done or was doing. For the Jewish people it was compulsory just once a year, at Yom Kippur, the Feast of Atonement, when they remembered God's amazing love for them and his spectacular liberation of them. But many Jewish people fasted more frequently, and the Pharisees, ostensibly the most holy of the Jews, fasted twice a week.

As with so many things that are part of the institution, though, an awful lot of Jews couldn't actually remember why they were doing it. Indeed, these disciples of John the Baptist – good Jews all of them, no doubt – begin their question to Jesus, “*How come we're fasting, but your lot aren't?*” They're not really sure what it's all about. So Jesus says that there's not that much point fasting while he's actually there – fasting's a bit solemn and they really ought to be feasting, enjoying his presence, making the most of having him with them. They like having and meal and a drink together, so let them do it while they've got the chance. After all, Jesus isn't going to be with them much longer and there will be plenty of time for fasting when he's gone. He's not doing away with all that stuff from The Law of Moses (he made that clear in The Sermon On The Mount), but he wants to clear away all the meaningless stuff that's grown up around it.

And, as so often with Jesus, he uses the question to make a more radical point, to move on well beyond what the questioner was asking. Tom Wright, writing about the wider conversation of which this question is a part, says, “*This passage is full of questions, to which [Jesus'] answer was 'Because everything is different now'.*” Jesus points out the need for wholesale transformation, root and branch changes which will affect every part of life. This new stuff he's talking about just can't be contained within or adapted to fit the existing way of going on. Dick France, another great New Testament scholar,

says, “*Jesus has brought something new, and the rituals and traditions of official Judaism cannot contain it.*” Jesus uses these two little illustrations to try and get his point over.

We’re so used to pre-shrunk fabrics today that we might not immediately get this, but when a hole appeared in an old garment, people would patch it up with another piece of cloth. If you used new cloth to patch it, cloth that hadn’t been already shrunk, you’d find that when you washed the garment, the new stuff would shrink and pull away from the old stuff, leaving an even bigger mess than before. You don’t patch old clothes with new stuff – you go and buy (or you make) a completely new garment

And we normally use bottles for our wine, so the idea of putting it into a skin is probably a bit strange to us, too. In Jesus’ day, people would sew up an old animal skin to use as a container – like a big leather bag, really. You could put wine into it to keep; and if it was new wine, which was still fermenting, and you put it into an old skin, which was drying out and getting a bit brittle, as the wine brewed in the container, it would cause the dry skin to expand and then burst. (I do actually remember when I was a small boy a bottle of dandelion and burdock bursting open in my auntie’s larder – a similar process, I think. A plastic container of elderflower champagne I was making burst in my room at university and took the paint off the ceiling!)

So Jesus is saying that you can’t just tinker with things or the whole lot will be spoiled. He wasn’t bringing a new way of life that could be patched on to the old stuff. If you were going to be filled with the Spirit of God, which he promised his followers, then you’d need to make sure you could cope with the difference it would make. This isn’t about a few minor adjustments to your life, or you won’t get any of the benefit. This is about starting all over again, about complete change and renewal, which we find it difficult to get a grip on.

Later on in the New Testament, when he is writing to the Christians in Corinth, St Paul puts it like this: “*From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!*” (2 Corinthians 5:16,17). This is going back to first principles, being re-created, starting at the very beginning. Jesus tells Nicodemus it’s as radical as being “*born again*” (John 3:3). You can’t get much more transformational than that.

“*New creation*” and being “*born again*” are useful phrases, great ways of summing up what this is all about, lovely and poetic and memorable. But they are still a bit vague – and open to misinterpretation as well. What does this look like in practice? Well, we’ve looked at some of this before, haven’t we? It’s the difference between completely changing our way of life and simply modifying our behaviour. Let’s think of our way of life, our attitudes, as the old garment – after all, that’s what we come to Jesus with to start with. And Jesus offers us this new idea of the Kingdom, of living as one of his disciples. We can’t just patch that new disciple-like behaviour on to our old set of attitudes. The old attitudes have to change – our way of life has to be transformed. Otherwise our attempts at new behaviour, our trying to follow in the way of Jesus, will be influenced by all those old ways of thinking. You can’t start to talk about loving your neighbour and make attempts at helping others, if your underlying attitudes are those of selfishness and self-centredness. You can’t talk about giving all to Jesus if you’re still desperate to hang on to your possessions and property. You can’t talk about putting others first if your first thought is always to get things done your way. It just won’t work! The old attitudes will start to peep through and in the end everything will be worse than when you started. Look again at *Romans 12:1,2*: “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*”

It’s a question we’ve asked before, but we’ll ask it again. Are you a lifestyle Christian or do you have a Christian lifestyle? I’ve never fallen into the trap of actually watching *Made In Chelsea*, but I’ve seen so many trailers for it that it feels like I know everything about it. It seems to me that it’s a programme

about people who want to portray a particular lifestyle – and they do that by being very self-conscious about their clothes, their accents, their cultural references, their general appearance. Underneath it all, they're just like the rest of us – sneaky, self-obsessed, materialistic – but they seem to be rich, fast-living and cutting edge.

And there are plenty of people who try to portray a particularly Christian appearance. For one reason or another, they try to bolt on some of the trappings of Christianity – the bits of unshrunk new cloth – without changing the underlying attitudes. So they will come along to worship on a Sunday, go to the odd conference during the year, put a fish badge on their car, talk earnestly about prayer or healing or theology. They might even do some of the stuff that doesn't look too weird amongst their friends – use fairly traded products, try to give a bit to charity, that kind of thing. But underneath there is still the old focus on themselves, the old desire to look good but not stick out too much. They might even try to justify it all as an attempt to keep in with their non-Christian friends “so they can witness to them” (not that they ever do). That's being a lifestyle Christian, sticking a bit of veneer on to give the right impression. And when things get tough, the new veneer comes off and the old you is exposed for what it really is.

Jesus is all about having a Christian lifestyle, allowing attitudes to be changed, transformed by the power of his Holy Spirit, following his teaching root and branch, letting God work in your very soul so that every part of you is renewed. It's having a completely new approach to life, looking at things as Jesus would. It means that if you do fast – or whatever – you do it for the right reasons and you know why you're doing it. It means some deep changes to the way you live, think and act. It means transformation in every way. It means moving forward into the values of the Kingdom of God, leaving behind all the selfish and sinful attitudes of the past. There's a bit in the Old Testament, in the book of *Numbers*, where God's people who have been liberated from slavery in Egypt, are looking back nostalgically to the Egyptian food they're missing: “[They] began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.’” (*Numbers 11:4-6*) They forgot the benefits of being free and looked at the stuff that was very much on the surface of things.

Let me ask you that question again – Are you just a lifestyle Christian or do you really want a Christian lifestyle? Are you ready for that whole-life transformation that Jesus can bring? Do you want the whole lot changed so that when things don't go quite the way you want it doesn't all fall apart? Jesus can do that. Jesus can transform your life. Jesus can bring the changes that will help you and will stay with you. Take the opportunity to do that this morning as we remember what it cost Jesus to make that possible.

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Look at *2 Corinthians 5:16,17* and *John 3:3*. "*New creation*" and being "*born again*" are useful phrases, great ways of summing up what this is all about, poetic and memorable. In practice we can't just patch that new disciple-like behaviour on to our old set of attitudes. The old attitudes have to change – our way of life has to be transformed. Otherwise our attempts at new behaviour, our trying to follow in the way of Jesus, will be influenced by all those old ways of thinking. Look at *Romans 12:1,2*.

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### **Questions for discussion**

Go on, then – share some light bulb jokes!

Why do we find change so difficult – as individuals and as a church?

Is change always good? Why/why not?

Why do we need to change our attitudes (not just our behaviour)? How can we do that?

What are the most important elements of a Christian lifestyle for you?

What are you going to do about this? What might we need to do as a church? (The first part of this question is the more important.)