

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 48”

Matthew 16:21-28

We come this morning to one of those passages Mark Twain must have thinking about when he said, “*It’s not the passages in the Bible that I don’t understand that worry me – it’s the passages I do understand.*” They’re not difficult things to understand – but they’re very difficult to take seriously in the sense that they demand a response. Up to this point as we’ve been reading through this account of Jesus’ life and ministry according to Matthew, we have seen that the people who were following Jesus around have had an opportunity to see something of the Kingdom of God in action. The Hebrew prophets had foretold a day when God’s rule would eventually run uncontested in the world, when creation would be restored to the state God originally intended, before sin and evil had distorted and perverted so much of it. Then Jesus arrived – the Kingly Messiah who was going to start the process of bringing to reality that kingdom of God.

And he did that in what he said – teaching the people directly and in stories. He demonstrated in the way he acted – showing that the old rules and regulations, which were by now a way of keeping people in thrall to the religious leaders, were not what it was all about. He showed it by healing people and confronting the forces of evil which ruined and demeaned them, giving them back their humanity and restoring a lost sense of community. He even showed that he was Lord of all creation by producing food more or less from nowhere and taming the destructive power of nature as it raged over the Sea of Galilee. Everything was nice and comfortable – the Kingdom of God was a happy place and anyone could be a part of it: Jews, Gentiles, holy men and miserable sinners.

But those who followed Jesus have, up to this point, had the Kingdom “on approval” – have a look at it and see if you like it. This is what it will all be about: healing, wholeness, *shalom*, a new perspective on this world, a new agenda for your lives. The old agenda of tradition, rules, self-preservation has had its day and new things are going to be happening. But the mood is beginning to change. Jesus, who in the last section identified himself as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, is certainly going to make a difference, but not in the triumphant way expected of a political and military leader. He tells his disciples here that he is going to have to suffer, to die.

As we said last time, this is a pivotal point in the life and ministry of Jesus. He lets these disciples know that he is now on his way to Jerusalem – and on his way there to die! Now, if you are interested in this Kingdom, in the new agenda, the radical alternative to the way you’ve been told life should be lived – now, there’s a decision to make. The approval period is over and it’s time to make up your mind – will you buy into it, or reject it as something you don’t want? What a choice! So, if you’re interested in this,

if you want to be a part of the Kingdom of God, if you want to get the very best out of life now and for ever more, it's time to decide. And there seem to be four parts to this decision.

1. **THE DECISION TO FOLLOW JESUS**

"If anyone would come after me ..." says Jesus. And, as we've seen, there were many people who came after Jesus, who followed him round, who chased him from one town to another looking for miracles, wanting his advice, eager to challenge his theology. No doubt the people who had been following him around had all kinds of reasons for being there – curiosity, need, boredom, real interest, critical motives even. But they were there. They knew something was going on and they wanted to see a bit more. And Jesus spells out to his closest followers what this will all mean..

And for many people even today I suppose it's a bit like "following" someone on Twitter. People who show interest in Jesus – some of you here this morning perhaps – here out of curiosity, wanting to find out a bit more. Some of you are here because you can't think of anything else to do on a Sunday morning – it's what you've always done. Some of you don't really want to be here, but your spouse or a friend has brought you along. Some of you are here to see what you can get out of it all. There are all kinds of motives for following Jesus in that sense. And some of you may well have made up your mind, or slipped into the attitude, that you aren't too bothered about getting in any deeper.

2. **THE DECISION TO DENY ONESELF**

But Jesus says that those who really want to follow have got to decide where the priorities are going to lie. Those who want to get in deeper have got to *"deny themselves"*. Self-denial is part of the package. There used to be a Salvation Army campaign each year called "Self-Denial Week" – I don't know if it still exists. The point was that you denied yourself something – your chocolate, your magazines, your beer or whatever – for a week and gave the money to their work. This is not that kind of self-denial – denying yourself something. It's actually renouncing yourself, giving up on the idea that you and you alone are the main focus of activity and interest in the little world you inhabit.

Self-denial is what Jesus here talks about when he says that the follower must "deny himself". He must put his own desires way down the list. That's a difficult task, isn't it? We all like to think that we do it, but how many of us really do? For so many people, Christianity is only another means to getting what everyone else gets anyway – it's just that we can pray for it! And we cheerfully justify it by saying that

“God wants the best for us”, that we have to be like the people round about us so that we can witness more effectively, that we don’t want to appear weird, that the Bible is full of examples of God’s blessing coming in material and financial ways, that we need to be responsible about planning for the future of ourselves and our children.

That is all rubbish! Following Jesus is not to be seen as just another means to the end of self-gratification. It’s most unfortunate – no, that’s a bit too gentle: it’s quite heretical – that over the years Christian piety has totally bypassed the message of Jesus in this verse. We need to get away from this unbiblical, unchristian, wrong-headed notion that so long as we have our daily quiet time, go to church on Sunday and put a few pounds in the TEAR Fund box we can continue living and acting as the world around us does. We don’t need to change our attitudes and our aspirations at all. Why shouldn’t we be comfortable? Why shouldn’t we want to keep up with the Joneses? Why shouldn’t we stick a fish badge on our big cars and stick texts on the walls of our conservatories – a little bit of piety and a few well chosen verses can easily baptise all that the world does and wants?

“Not so,” says Jesus. “If you follow me, you’d better get it into your head that self-denial is right up there at the top of the list”. (And in Luke’s version of this, it’s daily, not just during Lent or Christian Aid week.) After all, Jesus points out, there’s no point at all gaining the whole world and then losing your soul because you’ve sold out to the values and attitudes of the sinful world around you. That constant quest for the biggest and the best, for the most lavish and the most expensive, for the most comfortable and the most secure will sap your very soul. You will be sucked dry and end up denuded of your humanity. What’s the point having an extension on your house if your soul is just a cesspool? What’s the point of aiming for the top all the time if God sees you at the bottom? What are your priorities?

Now, for the disciples as for us today, this is a radical reversal of normal human values. Usually our culture tells us to look after Number One, to ensure that we are catered for, that our own whims are indulged. Whether that’s a conscious decision on our part, or whether it’s an attitude that we imbibe subconsciously from the society of which we’re a part, or whether it’s something that is just built into us as a genetic predisposition, a mechanical reflex to ensure the continuation of our species (as Richard Dawkins and others would have us believe), the will to survive, and to survive with the most stuff, is there in all of us, we’re told.

But Jesus says paradoxically that we do that at the expense of our very selves. He talks of losing your identity, yourselves, your very souls (it’s the same Greek word – ψυχη/psyche – for “life” and “soul” here) in the desperate desire to satisfy their lust for more. Here’s the source of the legend of Faust, who sold his soul to the Devil in order to achieve his own desire. (Or, if you haven’t heard of Faust but you

watch *The Simpsons*, the story of Bart selling his soul to Milhous for five dollars whilst cleaning the Reverend Lovejoy's organ pipes.) Those who are so desperate to accumulate possessions or status or celebrity, think what it is doing to your soul. But all of us need to think how close we are putting our own desires and our own wants to the top of our list of priorities. In the Kingdom of God, where love and compassion are the key characteristics, there can be no place for selfishness. And, after all, what are you going to do with it all when the end comes, when this life is over? As someone (Jim Elliott) once said, "*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep for that which he cannot lose.*"

3. **THE DECISION TO TAKE UP THE CROSS**

But Jesus goes beyond even self-denial, beyond simply giving up those things that you'd like to have – he talks here of self-sacrifice, of losing your very life! If you are really serious about living as Jesus wants, and living in the eternal dimension to which his own life points, then you need to give up the ideas you have about living according to your own agenda. In his powerful book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*" And Bonhoeffer knew all about that!

Jesus puts it in very graphic terms here – and once again it is a phrase that has become so familiar to us and so removed from its original context that it has lost much of its impact for us. Jesus says that the person who really wants to follow him must "*take up his cross*". We have reduced that to the little phrase, "*We all have our cross to bear*" to refer to minor ailments or little irritations. It's a way of describing those things that everyone has to put up with from time to time, the minor problems of humanity.

But when Jesus spoke these words those who heard them knew what "*taking up your cross*" really implied. It meant nothing other than death. The person who was made to carry his cross was on his way to one place and one place alone – the place of execution. If you picked up your cross, then every appeal had failed, every avenue of reprieve had been exhausted – there was no turning back from the inevitability of death. It's quite difficult for us to grasp as we no longer have any kind of capital punishment in Britain, but I suppose the nearest idiom to this would be to say, drawing from the American scene, "Whoever wants to follow me must begin each day in the electric chair." It's an image which speaks of putting to death every selfish desire and every thought for one's own comfort. Taking up the cross is not to be taken lightly!

It is part of our calling as Christians. It is a non-negotiable part of our participation in the life of the Kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus died on the cross to save us from the eternal consequences of our own wrong choices, but the cross can never be limited solely to a means by which Jesus gets us into heaven. In his book *The Challenge of Jesus*, Tom Wright says this: “*We do not – we dare not – simply treat the cross as the thing which saves us ‘personally’, but which can be left behind when we get on with the job.*”

You see, the person who was carrying the cross was going to be crucified on it. He had only one way to go. There was no looking back. If we take seriously the call of Jesus and we take up our cross, we cannot look back, back to the life we used to leave. There can be no nostalgia for the past, no sense of pride in what we think we have achieved ourselves, no sneaking pleasure in the sins of previous years. That has gone.

The person who was carrying the cross had said goodbye to the world. There would be no going back, no enjoying the kind of things he had in the past. That was gone, never to be experienced again. And if we take seriously the call of Jesus and we take up our cross, we cannot go back to those earlier patterns of behaviour, to those old ways of living which were at odds with the values and attitudes of the Kingdom of God.

The person who was carrying the cross could have no further plans of his own. His fate lay entirely in the hands of others – those who would lay him down on that wooden beam and hammer the spikes through his wrists, then watch as he writhed and screamed for hours in the scorching Mediterranean sun. If we take seriously the call of Jesus and take up our cross, then our plans for the future are taken out of our hands and we submit ourselves to the leading of God. We allow him and him alone to take us forward.

That’s a scary thought, isn’t it? It’s great to be a part of the Kingdom of God, but it takes total commitment – a renouncing of our own agenda, our own plans and desires – and a complete trust in God. In human terms it’s a risky business, but really there’s nothing to lose by taking up that challenge and everything to lose by rejecting it. But there’s one more decision.

4. THE DECISION TO GO WHERE JESUS LEADS

Those who come after Jesus are to be prepared to “*follow him*”. That’s not just in the sense of going round after him and seeing what’s going on: it’s in the sense of walking his path, following in his footsteps. The way of Jesus is a way of love and compassion and integrity, of holiness. And the way of Jesus, as we’ve seen, leads to death – death of one’s own reliance and emphasis on self-sufficiency and

self-satisfaction, death of one's own dreams and plans, death of one's own agenda and the adoption of his.

But although it's a path that *leads to* death, it's not a path that *ends in* death. Jesus walked into death as he hung naked and humiliated on that cross, but he walked through it and out the other side. We follow Jesus to death and beyond. As Jesus predicts his own death here he also says that "*after three days he [must] rise again.*" We follow Jesus into the jaws of death as we accept the totally life-absorbing commitment to which he calls us, but we know that we can follow him out the other side into a new and endless life in the fulfilled Kingdom of God.

Now we've looked at four decisions this morning – but they're not four different options, they're a package. If you're serious about Jesus, you take the lot. If you've got the guts, there's a commitment to be made here. Deciding to follow Jesus means denying yourself, not putting your own priorities at the top of the list all the time. It means taking up your cross and recognising that you're not going to look back and there's a tough time ahead. It means walking the way of Jesus, living with integrity and reflecting his love and compassion, facing death and letting Jesus take you through it and out the other side into the glorious reality of the Kingdom of God.

What's your decision, then? Probably most of you here this morning would call yourselves Christians. You've all had a glimpse of the Kingdom of God – through these words of Matthew and through your own experience. Now it's make-your-mind-up time. Will you walk the way of Jesus, adopting his agenda and walking into death and out the other side with him? Or will you stay an embarrassment to the one to whose name you take, and lose out on the awesome promise of the Kingdom of God? It's your decision – no-one else's – and you don't know how long you've got to make up your mind.

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you understand by "*he must deny himself*"? How has that happened in your life, or in the life of someone you know?
2. The cross is a potent symbol of commitment and it is used not only here but also many times in Paul's letters as a way of expressing something of what it means to be a Christian (look at *Romans 6:6, Galatians 5:24, 6:14*). Why is it such a good way of describing this? What does it mean to you?
3. What is *v25* all about?
4. Why do you think we are so reluctant to take commitment to Jesus seriously?
5. Do you have any ideas about what Jesus might mean in *v28*?
6. What one thing have you learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?