

Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1 – 5, 10

### **Called to Follow**

Many football fans will talk about “following” their team and of course, some do, literally - traipsing up and down the country (and some even going abroad) to follow the progress of their team. Others will content themselves with keeping an eye on the scores, reading the reports in the papers, or, if they are lucky enough, watching their heroes in a televised game. Even in this context there is quite a range of understanding of what it means to “follow”. (A similar range of understanding will apply to the term “supporter”). When Jesus called the fishermen Simon and Andrew, James and John to follow him, he and they were in no doubt that that meant quite literally that they would leave their boats and nets and livelihood and follow him around the country, spending their lives in his company, sharing his work, enduring the hardships and dangers that Jesus faced as well as the highpoints along the way. Ultimately, for many of the early followers it was to mean giving their lives for the cause of the gospel. A disciple was quite simply someone who followed – who walked in the steps of the Master and rather like an apprentice, learned from him.

I don't suppose that Simon Peter and Andrew and the others had much of idea what lay ahead of them. There was no strategy document for them to consult, no business plan available – while they knew that they were going to share in the building of the kingdom of God, their commitment wasn't so much to a cause as to a person – to Jesus himself. First and foremost, they were called to follow **Jesus**.

### **Called to follow Jesus**

It may seem very old fashioned but that is still the prime calling for a Christian believer. Our allegiance is not really to a cause, our loyalty isn't so much to the church (whether a local congregation, a denomination, or the church worldwide) it is a personal commitment to Jesus our Lord and Saviour. We are called to follow **Jesus**. So, what does that mean nowadays? To what extent does it mirror the calling of the fishermen of Galilee? To what extent is it different? At first sight it is quite different in that it simply isn't possible to walk round the countryside with Jesus. While he is utterly committed to us and his promise to be with us always still holds good, the nature of our walk with him has to be spiritual whereas Simon and the other early followers were able to walk and talk and eat with him. For the most part, modern day disciples don't have to give up everything, leave their homes, families and livelihoods and spend their whole lives in Christian service. (Though I have a friend who spent 40 years in Indonesia away from home and family working to share the gospel of Jesus with people who might not otherwise have seen or heard anything of Christians or the gospel). With these differences most Christians today shy away from too active a notion of “following Jesus.” Few are called to spend a lifetime of service in a foreign land, but we are ALL called to follow Jesus.

## **Only one track**

Nowhere in the New Testament can I find any evidence of a variety of discipleship options. There isn't a "tough disciple" option for especially keen Christians perhaps with copious quantities of faith and spirituality and a "standard disciple" option for the rest of us whose faith and spirituality are more measured and limited. Jesus comes to us all, and by his Spirit, calls each and everyone us to respond to his love and his call to follow him. There is only one track – not an impossible path, not a way that is beyond our ability to tread, but one way – living in step with a gracious and loving Saviour, who longs to live in fellowship with us, who delights to give good things to us, who wants the very best for us. Many people are put off by this – many of us here in church among them. We fear that Jesus is asking more than we can give. We doubt our ability to deliver what he requires. We believe, we'd like to do the right thing, but we suspect that our faith isn't up to following him properly. We'll cheer him on from the side-lines. What we need to realise is that in and of ourselves NONE of us is "up to it." There has never been a single believer who has intrinsically been fit to be Jesus' disciple – not Andrew, not Simon Peter, not Saul of Tarsus, not any of the heroes of the faith down through the years, not the most faithful disciples of the modern era – not one of them and therefore not us either! But God called them anyway and he calls us anyway to follow his Son, to follow Jesus. How can we hope to follow Jesus if we feel ourselves so inadequate? The answer is surprisingly simple – Jesus makes it possible. Apart from a recognition that Jesus was someone really special I believe that what set Andrew and Simon Peter, Paul and the others apart was simply that they took him at his word – and they followed him, and they looked to him to equip them to serve him. Perhaps we have overdone our emphasis on self-sufficiency and independence – it's fine to a degree – but we are designed to interact with one another, to be of mutual help to one another AND to depend upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

As I read the scriptures there is no concept of a disciple being a special (perhaps superior) believer who is called to follow Jesus in a deeper, more profound and dedicated way with the rest of us being "ordinary" believers who can be content to walk an easier route that demands less faith and impinges less upon "real life." I just don't see it. I know many people would like it that way – but frankly, it's a myth. We are ALL called to follow Jesus, to heed his ways and to seek (with all the strength and power he can provide) to share in the establishing of the kingdom (or reign) of God. We have tended to think of following Jesus, of discipleship as a huge burden, a millstone around our necks. Yet, everything I read about following Jesus in the Bible speaks equally about the joy and privilege of fellowship with him as much as the tough times along the way. We're reminded that God gives us everything we need to do his will, of encouragement and support, of spiritual resources being made available to all who will trust so that we might do even greater things that Jesus did. If we imagine that our chances of doing anything for Jesus are down to our inherent abilities then, of course, we either won't begin, or we

will fall at the first hurdle. We are all called to follow Jesus, there is only way track – but we will only succeed as we open ourselves to his lead and equipping.

### **A variety of service**

We are all called to follow Jesus. Each and every one of us needs to trust Jesus and look to his equipping us to play our part in the advancement of his kingdom BUT the form of that service will vary enormously. We aren't identical, we are unique. Each of us is a distinct person, with qualities, traits, a personality and a set of experiences and opportunities which are different from any other human being. God knows our strengths and weaknesses; he knows us better than we know ourselves AND he loves us. He has no wish to force us into someone else's mould, he has no interest in disciple clones, he loves each and everyone us, made in his image, yet each unique in all creation and he calls us individually to a unique place in his service – one that he has prepared for us, and one for which he has prepared, and is preparing us. We might well be right in saying "I could never do what he or she is doing." God isn't calling you to mirror someone else – but he is calling you to be you, to do what he wants YOU to do, in his strength, for his glory.

There isn't any two track christian discipleship – no tough route, no easy route – just one way – trusting and following Jesus.

We are all called – not to some esoteric theoretical commitment to an ideal, to a philosophy – but to love, trust and follow Jesus, the Saviour Son of God, who loves us and gave his life for us and who longs to give us everything we need to follow him. That may seem like an impossible challenge – something that is beyond you – something you just don't think you have in you. Well, in yourself you are right – in ourselves none of us can hope to follow Jesus – but he makes it possible. He is the one who gives us his Spirit, who gives us the spiritual resources to follow Jesus.

It will mean different things for different people. He tailors our service to the variety of people we are, but the common thread is that none of us are supporters, we are all followers, followers of the Lord Jesus and it is he who gives us all that we need to be his true and faithful followers in our generation, just as he did for the fishermen of old.

Follow Him!

May the Lord bless you! Amen.