

Following Jesus does not mean only belief, mere intellectual assent, or some sort of spiritual connection. Jesus was God made flesh; God in human form. Jesus was raised to renewed bodily life after death. And our ultimate destination is not a disembodied eternity, but a bodily one in God's renewed Creation. Following Jesus therefore means following him with what we do, with our actions, with our bodies.

In the Luke 9 narrative, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, setting out resolutely to all that lies before him. As they get under way, three men have conversations with Jesus about journeying with him. We infer that all three turn back. We may be able to identify with the sorts of concerns that prevent them going on with Jesus to where he is going.

For the first the issue is apparently lack of security – assurance that there will be “a place to lay his head,” as Jesus says. For the second the issue is social convention or religious observance – “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” And for the third the concern is family ties – “First let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

Within the culture of 1st century Judaism these were perfectly understandable:

- The first person seems willing enough; and we are not told what becomes of him, but we may infer that he doesn't follow through on the avowal that he will follow Jesus wherever he may go once Jesus has made his response, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” The desire for security and safety is natural enough, especially from political danger – “foxes” was an idiom for Israel's political enemies, and Jesus used it to refer to Herod; the “birds of the air” could well refer to the Romans, who used the eagle as their emblem.
- The second man would have been aware that burying a parent was the chief responsibility of a son and a religious duty that took precedence over all others. To refuse this duty is tantamount to disobeying the commandment to honour one's father and mother.

- The third person would have been responding from his culture's deep value placed on kinship ties. Not taking the time to say goodbye would fly in the face of the sense of family.

These do not seem unreasonable concerns.

Have there been times when you have felt prompted by God to do something, but have not done it because something important has got in the way: family obligations, career aspirations, financial considerations, anxiety about the future, ...?

Or perhaps we see in the men's responses a series of excuses plucked out of the air. And perhaps we can identify with that too.

Have there been times when you have been guilty of making excuses to avoid a call to a new vocation, to avoid following the way of Jesus?

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

We must not delude ourselves, or others who might become followers of Christ, by imagining that there is no cost or sacrifice or pain associated with faithfully following him.

Discipleship is costly. Now the point here is not that Jesus calls us at all times and everywhere to turn our back on security and comfort, religious tradition, family ties and the like. These sorts of things have their place, often a good place, in our lives.

The thing is that at some time we will reach a point, a fork in the road, where we have to make a choice: a difficult choice between something important to us, and the call of Jesus to follow him here or there into something new.

Whether or not the issues of the three men who might have followed Jesus were real or were just lame excuses plucked out of the air, the ultimate problem is their lack of trust.

Do we trust Jesus enough to let go of our perceived certainties and the things that give us a sense of security when he calls us into places we haven't been before?

Do we trust Jesus enough to be willing to give up home, career, income and relationships in order to follow his call to ministry and mission in a new place?

Do we trust Jesus enough to be willing to risk losing the respect of friends or colleagues, to risk mocking, when there is opportunity to identify ourselves as followers of Jesus and to talk about our faith?

Do we trust Jesus enough to be willing to risk conflict to take a stand against an injustice rather than standing by silently watching?

Do we trust Jesus enough to be willing to forego the living standards of our peers when he calls us to work less for ourselves and more for people in need?

These, like the situations of the three men in Luke 9, are just illustrations. The details here are not the point; and I don't present them as a judgement on anyone's particular situation and the choices they have made.

What does matter is the general principle, the general question: when following Jesus becomes costly, do we trust him enough to follow where he leads?

Being a Christian and a disciple of Jesus gives us a whole new identity. We now live knowing that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). Because our lives are now measured by eternal things, we are "exiles and aliens" in this world (1 Peter 2:11).¹

¹ This and next two paragraphs substantially quote Rogness

Christian writer Philip Scharper describes the Christian life in this way: “A popular church metaphor is that of the people of God on pilgrimage. But a more apt metaphor should be that of the people of God as nomads. Pilgrims know where their journey is headed ... Nomads are called to go by uncertain paths to a place that shall be made holy at some indefinite time by something God shall say or do. And there is no guide, no guide except a pillar of fire by night and a wind-driven cloud by day – sounds and symbols of the Holy Spirit.”

Little did the disciples know that day that they would soon become nomads on this earth, travelling all over the known world, with no fixed home, living in often frightening and hostile circumstances, as followers of their Lord. But they were – and we are – also pilgrims, because pilgrims do have a final destination, namely in eternity with God.

It is because we as the church are nomads and pilgrims, exiles and aliens, that issues of character and community are important. We live in strange and uncertain times. We live in a nation where most do not follow Jesus, and where, in public life at least, overtly Christian values are rejected.

How do we build and maintain our distinctive character as the people of God in Palmerston North in the 21st century?

Paul wrote to the Galatians saying

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh.

And he goes on to write,

So I say, walk by the Spirit

At the time Paul was writing it was common for Gentiles to make a philosophical distinction between on the one hand our physical life, our bodily life, and on the other hand our spiritual life; and to regard the physical life as bad and the spiritual life as good. In those days those who did manual work were regarded as lowly, and those

who did no physical work but restricted themselves to the realm of ideas were regarded as superior.

But in Jewish understanding, and in Christian understanding, there is not this body-spirit dualism. As I said at the outset, Jesus was God made flesh; God in human form. Jesus was raised to renewed bodily life after death. And our ultimate destination is not a disembodied eternity, but a bodily one in God's renewed Creation. Following Jesus therefore means following him with what we do, with our actions, with our bodies.

It is very easy for us to hear "indulge the flesh" and to think of our bodies, and particularly of matters of sex and booze and the like. But the word translated "flesh" means fallen human nature – all of it, not just its physical manifestations. To "indulge the flesh" means to give in to what comes naturally, to give in to the ways of the surrounding culture which is untransformed by the Spirit of God, to do whatever we like. It certainly includes sex and drink; but is far wider than that.

Paul says,

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

What comes naturally is selfishness. What comes naturally to our fallen human nature is to do what makes us feel good right now. Paul lists several examples:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, carousing, and the like.

Yes, the sex and drink are there. But much of Paul's list is of things that go against community life, against the command to serve one another humbly in love:

hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.

Instead the Christian walks by the Spirit:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

The practices and disciplines of worship, of bible reading and study, of prayer and fasting, of silence and solitude and so on have been used since ancient times to help form the people of God to follow the way of the Spirit rather than the way of the prevailing culture. It is important that we develop and maintain these practices.

Character and community ... Walk by the Spirit; love your neighbour as yourself. As we the Church go forward in the age in which we live, with all its difficulties and uncertainties, I want to go with people whose characters are being formed in the way of the Spirit. Because otherwise we will not be in a state where we can together hear the call of Jesus and faithfully follow him. When there is “no guide except a pillar of fire by night and a wind-driven cloud by day” we need to be the kind of people who can hear and see these “sounds and symbols of the Holy Spirit.”

And I want to go with people who are trying to have each other’s backs, people who will stick by each other even when the going gets tough, even when we don’t necessarily like each other or always agree with one another. Because if I don’t have that then I go alone and vulnerable.

At the beginning of today’s Gospel passage, Luke records that “It happened that when the days leading up to his ascension were being fulfilled, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem”. Ascension makes us think of glory; of Jesus victoriously seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. But we must never forget that glory and victory were preceded by going to Jerusalem – to the cross. We like the idea of glory; we like comfort and security. But the way of Christ is the costly way of the cross.

Character and community ... Walk by the Spirit; love your neighbour as yourself; and follow where Jesus calls you and I and all of us to go, regardless of the cost.

Sources:

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