

What we do and say and hear in our service today reminds me of a song I learnt long ago: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus".

I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus:
No turning back, no turning back.

It is the last verse of that song that sprang to mind as I thought about our actions and readings today: "The world behind me, the cross before me"

"The cross before me" phrase has obvious resonance today as [at 10am] we follow the cross, held high by our crucifer, out into the street. We re-enact Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, a time at which he was acclaimed as king. We find ourselves reflecting on that scene of joyous welcome and anticipation of victory to come.

We enjoy being part of a triumphant crowd. We enjoy aligning ourselves with a king, with someone powerful, someone who has come (we hope) to win victory for us and free us from the powers that oppress us.

"The world behind me, the cross before me" resonates in another way too: in the gospel passage we recount and reflect on the latter part of Jesus' journey to the cross on which he died.

We perhaps like this part much less than the triumphal entry. Here our King is arrested, tried, tortured, humiliated, degraded, ... and dies. This doesn't look much like power and victory.

The discomfort increases as here we find ourselves among those who betrayed him, denied knowing him, brought charges against him, rejected him and cried out for his death; here we find ourselves among those in whose place he died.

The paradox is that it was precisely in Jesus our King's complete humbling of himself – going to his death, *even death on a cross*, a method devised by the Romans to

completely and publicly humiliate their enemies – it was precisely in his humbling of himself that Jesus displayed the utterly distinctive features of his kingship and won for us the true victory – yes, won even for us who find ourselves among the betrayers, deniers, and so on.

“I have decided to follow Jesus.”

The lyrics are, it is said, based on the last words of a 19th century Indian man from Assam province who, along with his family, decided to follow Jesus Christ after hearing the preaching of a Welsh missionary. Such a decision was then, as it is now, a dangerous thing to do in the face of religious militancy. Sure enough the village chief demanded that the man renounce his new faith, to which the convert declared, "I have decided to follow Jesus." In response to threats to his family, the man continued, "Though none go with me, still I will follow." Then his wife was killed; and he himself was executed while declaring, "The world behind me, the cross before me." This display of resolute faith is reported to have led to the eventual conversion of the chief and others in the village.¹

This man's story in many ways reflects Jesus' own journey.

Jesus went towards his fate with decision and determination – as we read in Luke 9:51, after Jesus had predicted his death a second time, he “*resolutely* set out for Jerusalem”.

Jesus was abandoned and denied by many of his closest followers, and derided by other people, yet he still kept his resolve.

Leaving worldly values and expectations behind, leaving *all* behind, he went to his death on the cross.

And, as a result of his faithful death and rising again, many many have been saved, and many more can yet be saved through his ongoing work.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Have_Decided_to_Follow_Jesus (viewed 2019 - the Wikipedia page no longer contains these story details)

As he was executed the Assamese man was declaring, " The world behind me, the cross before me." For him the world lay behind, left behind in death.

It feels like this is the end.

But, just as with Jesus and his resurrection, what lay before the man at his execution was expressed in the cross, the assurance in Christian faith that death would not mean the end: resurrection life in the age to come lies ahead for him, as it does for us. And it was not the end in the near term too, because the man's witness gave rise to many more coming to faith.

I have often thought that the words we sing might be the wrong way round. As we sing "The world behind me, the cross before me", I get the feeling that a lot of Christians are drawn towards a sort of world-denying, escapist perspective. There is the danger that we see the things of this world as not mattering, as being of no lasting consequence. There is a kernel of truth there; but the problem is that for some this leads to disengagement, to apathy and inaction.

I think there is merit in thinking of the words going the other way around: "the *cross* behind me, the *world* before me." In other words, in the light of the faith in which the dying and rising of Jesus was the pinnacle event, and standing strong in the promises of that faith, we turn our face *to* the world to live and work in it to advance God's purposes. Jesus calls his Church to *be* Church, to be salt and light in the world, and that does not mean disengagement and withdrawal. It means action! "The cross behind me, the world before me." Yes, Jesus left all behind and went to the cross. But Jesus went to the cross *precisely for* the sake of the world.

"The cross behind me, the world before me." Importantly our approach to the world must follow the model of the cross, the model of Jesus. Contrary to the expectations and hopes of those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, hailing him as king and expecting him to be a conqueror of the type so common in the world, Jesus came in humility. He calls us to take the same approach.

"The cross behind me, the world before me."

We are called to be a distinctive people, not to be cosy and comfortable, but ready to risk all out of allegiance to Jesus Christ. We are called to be a distinctive people so

that the world will come to the fullness of the knowledge of Christ – that every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.