

Following Him

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

“During this Lenten season, one question should dominate our thinking: “What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus?” One commentator suggests that after His baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness asking Himself the question of what it means to be Jesus, and that during Lent Christians are to ask in one way or another what it means to be Christians.ⁱ

When so much of our life as Christians has been, and no shame in this, tied up with working in, around and for the Church, these long, wearying, hollowing-out months of lockdown may well have led you, as well as me, to wonder what the point of being a Christian is.

There are times when our being busy for the Church, even for Jesus, has distracted us from thinking and wondering *why* it is that Jesus matters. At the beginning of the first lockdown the Presbytery of Edinburgh sent to every church a banner which says that whilst the building may be closed, the Church is still open. Ours is still on the railings that look on to Morningside station. It's been there for so long that most people no longer see it. Maybe a bit like our church building. It's been here for so long that people no longer see it. It was certainly salutary to be present when the first cohort of people to be vaccinated arrived here a few weeks ago, and marvelled at the beauty and spaciousness of our building. “I've never been inside before,” one lady told me. “I had no idea it was so beautiful.”

Hollowed out as our building now is, with the chairs tidied away, and all of our members tidied away in their homes, avidly watching this service online, or whatever it is that you are up to (!) what is the point of the Church? What is the point of Jesus? What is the point of following Him? Sam Wells, the Vicar of St Martin in the Fields, has said that Christian identity, “is not a possession to be owned or an achievement to be cherished or even a quality to be realized – it is a gift to be received. That gift comes in two main forms: it's the gift of a new past, in which the mistakes we have perpetrated are healed and the damage we have undergone is redeemed, collectively known as forgiveness; and the gift of a new future, in which the dread of punishment is lifted and the fear of oblivion is disarmed.”ⁱⁱ

Being a Christian is also more than being a disciple, or student of Jesus; it is about being a follower of Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus means committing the way you live your life, the way you shape your life, the ideals and aspirations of your life, all of these things – to Jesus. Being a Christian means a call to follow Jesus into the world, and to live life differently so that others might see what the kingdom of God Jesus promised might look like if people were willing to live a life that made a difference. You might not end poverty, or cure cancer, prevent famine, but somehow, because of the goodness of your life, and the way you choose to live it, the world might be a little bit better, a little bit brighter, a little bit kinder, a little bit more like Jesus and the Kingdom Jesus came to point us towards. It might mean sacrifice. It might mean struggle. It might mean not being completely successful. It might mean being about as faithful as we are able. But it *will* mean following Jesus. Choosing to follow Jesus. Deciding to follow Jesus.

It is interesting to note that as soon as Peter recognises Jesus as God's chosen One, the Messiah, the Christ, and Jesus started to talk about what this would mean, and that it would lead to His death; and Peter tries to stop Jesus talking in this way, Jesus doesn't let go. As soon as Peter says, 'Christ', Jesus says, 'Cross.' "The trouble about the cross is that it has been such an all-pervasive Christian symbol that we are thoroughly used to it."ⁱⁱⁱ All our churches have them, in wood, or stone, or metal. We print it on Bibles, we give it as jewellery, we put it in stained glass windows. We've almost entirely domesticated what was once *the* symbol of degradation and suffering and shame. It also stands for decision, and conscious and deliberate choice, the journey of a life-time in obedience to God. There it remains, awkwardly, and enticingly, at the heart of our faith, and as the supreme symbol of what following Jesus means.

"If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."

What is Jesus saying? If anyone *would follow Me*, if anyone *wants to follow Me*... then each one has to deny themselves, put away their ego, take up a cross, and follow. For some that might mean enduring suffering in a time of persecution. For some it will mean what was important in the past, but proved not to be worthwhile, has to be let go so that something different might emerge. For some it might mean finding a new way to serve, or help. For some it might mean taking a long hard look at the life they are leading, and asking in a way that may make their British-

reserved toes curl, 'Am I really the best that I can be? Have I given up too easily? Have I given in a long time ago? Have I the courage to square my shoulders one more time, and be the better person God knows, I know, that I can be?'

This following of Jesus passage, this taking up the cross passage, is about halfway through Mark's Gospel. After the teaching and the healing and the miracles, Jesus turns His face to Jerusalem, and prepares for the next stage of His journey. To show what service and sacrifice will look like. And inviting those who would follow, who want to follow, to walk with Him along the way.

It was always this way for the children of God, the people of faith. Abraham, 99 years old, encounters God Who says to the old man, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be blameless." Step out in faith, step out in hope, step out in love, walk with Me, and believe.

You might be at a crossroads in your life. These locked-down months have made many of us to examine who we are, what we might do, how we might behave, what we actually believe, where we might go next. This story of Jesus speaks to each one of us at such a crossroads, but assures us that in the picking up of our crosses, we follow One Who has already committed to do the same.

I can't help but feel our country, our world, our Church, also finds a crossroads looming large. What kind of kind of country, world, Church do we want to be? Already there is talk of 'building back better', and of 'facing uncomfortable truths'. That's crossroads talk. That's deciding what we want to do and be talk. That's Kingdom of God talk. That's Jesus talk. And it's right here in our Bible readings today. No sugar-coated faith here, but opportunities on this last day of February, to consider how we might give ourselves up to acts of love, compassion, justice and peace. There's sacrifice, but there's hope and horizon too. Or looking at it another way in an Arabic phrase we might see, 'February with wintry weather and cold sad blasts of wind, and the smell of summer in it.'

As we reflect on what it means to be a follower of Jesus, here are some words Mother Teresa allegedly had placed on the walls of the children's home that she ran.

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous, be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have and it will never be enough. Give anyway.

In the final analysis it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

If you are thinking about following Him, there's somewhere to start. There's somewhere to continue.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*, p74

ⁱⁱ Samuel Wells, *A Future That's Bigger Than The Past*, p31

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, *Will You Follow Me?*, p119