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Follow me – Mark 1:14-20

Jesus said “Follow me” and in so doing he changed the world. Who do you follow? Ask a younger person and they will think it is a social media question about who they follow on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the like.

I’m told that 3.5 billion people are on social media; that one million new users come on every day; that is 11 people every second. They spend on average 2 hours 16 minutes each day simply on social media. In the end it can be more time consuming than transformative, but it is where most followers are found.

As children we played “Follow my leader”. As adults our willingness to play depends on the leader. 2000 years ago Jesus called four people as they were working at the lakeside to become his band of brothers. A journey of faith began that still is continuing today.

How are we to see that call? Was it an invitation or a command? It was probably both, and it still is. For if Jesus is, as Mark claims, the Son of God, then he has the right to invite and command.

What do we make of their response? “At once they left their nets and followed him” It is extraordinary on any understanding. What would make anyone, any group leave their work, their way of life and set off, not knowing why or where or how long or anything? Today we would wonder how they could have left, without a job description, terms and conditions, a contract and a risk assessment!

We need to dig deeper into this story, for that call still comes to us, and it is as disruptive, costly and gloriously transformative now as it was then. Too easily we settle down get stuck, in a rut when the call to follow would urge us forward to find life in all its fullness.

The gospels recount a variety of stories of how Jesus and the fishermen met. It may well have been that this was not their first encounter. John talks in his gospel of how many, looking for more, found hope in the preaching of John the Baptist, the first prophet to

appear for over 400 years. Among those who responded were Andrew and probably John. He called people to repentance - a change of thinking, a change of outlook and a change of direction. "Same old, same old" would not do and would not deliver.

His central message was "Someone is coming." "I am preparing the way- so get ready now!" Long awaited, long prayed for, the Messiah was on the move at last and he had come.

John pointed out Jesus to his disciples and Andrew and John spent the day with him. Then Andrew took his brother Simon to meet Jesus and they had a memorable encounter. "You are Simon... you will be Peter."

Two significant events happened before the lakeside encounter:

First John the Baptist's ministry was cut short. He was arrested and imprisoned. Governments can be ruthless when threatened. It became clear that to be a follower of John or his Messiah could prove very costly indeed. Power holders never surrender power easily. They never have, they never will.

Secondly a keynote message rang out
A new Kingdom is staking its claim and its King has arrived It is a kingdom with room for the marginalised and the ostracised, the foreigner and the stranger, the needy and the desperate, the widow and the orphan, it is for any and for all.

In this kingdom you would be welcome and find an open door and hospitality. Mercy would be the default position and justice a requirement.

This kingdom is good news:- forgiveness for failure, a new family, a new beginning and work for you to do.

It begins at a personal level with grace and mercy working its change from within, bringing cleansing and new life. But then it expands touching all of life bringing healing, wholeness and reconciliation.

Citizens of this kingdom would learn to challenge structures and ways of thinking that oppress and dehumanise.

Jesus would describe the coming kingdom in Isaiah's words:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind;
to set the oppressed free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Jesus fearlessly proclaimed the Kingdom. But would there be those who would make it happen, who would stand up and be counted?

It was a moment of truth and destiny. All four fishermen had to forsake what they had to follow Christ. James and John left a family business and stopped mending broken nets to help mend broken lives. Discipleship is disruptive but it is life-transforming

In following Jesus they would go to unfamiliar places and into situations they would not themselves have chosen. Jesus invited them to embark on a journey not to ride a carousel!

And what would they have learned in the course of their travels with Jesus? They saw him touch lepers when everyone else shrank back. They went with him into the homes of cynical critics and saw him confront them on their own territory. They accompanied him into homes to eat with tax collectors, parasitical extortioners with whom society would not pass the time of day.

Those were lessons they would never forget because they were there when they happened

But all that was still in the future. What they heard then was Jesus say, "Follow me. Become my disciples," and they were hooked for life.

Our reaction to other people telling us what to do is often negative. "Who are you? What right have you..? Get off my back! Leave me alone! Mind your own business! Don't interfere!"

However if the call comes from someone we respect and admire our response is different. We count such an interest in us as an honour not an imposition and are glad to be included Here was a call to leave a prosaic life and begin an adventure of faith.

It was Helen Keller born blind, deaf and unable to speak, but who had a living faith in Christ who said, "Life is either a daring adventure, or it is nothing at all."

Jesus, however, does not stand still. He is always on the move. We need to keep up with him.

To follow Jesus is not to stay in the one place for your whole life, never changing, never growing. Faith grows in the following as his apprentice, his disciple.

One of the things that make a journey an adventure is when we don't know the destination. If you have been journeying with Jesus any length of time you know how common surprises are.

However, journeying with Jesus is not only an adventure, but a relationship. You are not following a set of laws or trudging behind a set of beliefs, fitting in to an agreed way of doing things. You are walking with Jesus and that is how the best friendships develop.

Different people start their apprenticeship with Jesus in a variety of ways. For some it is through a dramatic conversion. For others, often growing up in a Christian home, it is a growing almost unconscious awareness till they decide to ink over what had been previously written in pencil.

The way we get on our journey with Jesus is not the crucial matter. It is that we are following now and are determined not to stop.

Suppose, however, this is not just a message to each of us personally but also to our church at this time. Back in 2001 "The Church without Walls" report said all they had written could be summed up in the two words, "Follow Me." They wrote "These two words carry the seeds of the renewal and reformation of the Church. We are called to be no more and no less than followers of Jesus Christ. Everything else is an expansion of that calling or a distraction from it". If "Follow me" was a computer icon, then clicking on that would open up all you need to know to be God's people in God's world. The first words of Jesus in the Gospels are "Follow me"; the final words of the Fourth Gospel are "Follow me." The sober question we must answer is this "If we were called then in 2001 to follow, have we moved far enough and fast enough since?"

Down through the centuries one of the strengths of our Church was that we stood firm against all the changing fashions of the centuries. Indeed we are built in such a way as to make change difficult. However the weakness of our Church is that when the Spirit has prompted us we have not moved. The danger is that we are left behind when Christ goes on ahead.

Too easily, like the disciples by the lakeside, we can fill our time doing useful things, expend our energy for the good of others and miss the call of Jesus, who walking past calls us to

leave behind the familiar and follow him. To follow him may not be safe but it is in the end the way to life.