

## LUKE 9.57-62: FOLLOW ME

[Chelmsford 26 January 2014]

This morning we have had the great joy of seeing three families bring their children for a service of dedication. For people who are not familiar with Baptist churches, it may seem a little strange that we have not baptized them.

But we don't sprinkle water on the children – let alone immerse them in a baptistery.

In our tradition we seek to follow the teaching of the New Testament and reserve baptism for believers.

Baptism is in many ways a much more solemn event than dedication

For in baptism we publicly resolve to follow Jesus– Jesus who as we discovered from our reading this morning declared: “**Anyone who wants to come with me must forget self, take up their cross every day, and follow me**” (Lk 9.29).

Do notice, that the Christian faith is not just believing, its about following.

And that can be a pretty big ask. To be a Christian is to follow Jesus, whatever the cost.

In recent years I have had the joy of baptizing many young people whom I dedicated when they were children toward the beginning of my ministry.

Alas, I will not be minister of this church when Adom-Nuako, Gabriel & Oliver ask for baptism – but I hope that day will come, when they too will want to follow Jesus.

But what will it mean for them to follow Jesus?

With that thought in mind I thought it would be helpful to look at an occasion when Jesus met with three would-be followers.

### 1. JESUS CALLS US TO COUNT THE COST

Luke begins his account of Jesus' encounter with three-would be followers in this way: “**As they went on their way, a man said to Jesus, ‘I will follow you wherever you go’**” (9.57)

What an offer! Whereas Jesus had to call Peter & Andrew, James & John, here we find a man actually volunteering his services - indeed, placing no limit on his services - “**I will follow you WHEREVER you go**”.

Matthew in his Gospel tells us that this man was “**a teacher of the law**” (Matt 8.19) - he was “**a doctor of the law**” (REB), “**a religion scholar**” (Peterson).

I.e. he was an intellectual - just the sort of fellow to lend a bit of status and prestige to that rather ordinary group of men who had gathered around Jesus.

For let's face it, Jesus' first disciples were not all that an impressive crowd - the group was made up of fishermen, a tax collector and the like.

None of them seem to have been respected members of the community.

And now this teacher of the Law offers his services.

You would expect Jesus to welcome him with open arms - and yet he puts him off.

The strangeness of this response becomes even clearer in a modern setting.

Suppose one of the great & the good of Chelmsford were to come to our church.

Some really high-flyer and they were to ask if they could become a member of our church.

What would we say? What would we do?

I'm sure that the last thing we would do would be to put such a person off.  
But this is precisely what Jesus does.

**“Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’” (9.58).**

In one sense this response was not true.

- For Jesus, the Son of Man, could have had somewhere to lay his head.
- He could have gone home to Mary at Nazareth.
- Or if that were inconvenient, then I am sure that Peter's mother-in-law in Capernaum would have put him up.

But that is not the point. It's not that Jesus could have had nowhere to lay his head if he wanted to, but rather, ***in seeking to fulfil God's will, he found himself unable to have a bed of his own.***

He could have remained at home, he could have lived quite comfortably.

But God called him to be an itinerant preacher - to go from one village to the next. God called him to give up home and home comforts.

In other words, Jesus was saying to this would-be-follower: *“If you would join my group, if you would become one of my disciples, then you must be prepared to give up your comfortable ways”.*

The teacher of the law was eager to follow Jesus, but Jesus restrains his enthusiasm. He asks him: *“Have you really thought through what this involves?”*

Jesus does not want as followers people who were swept off their feet in a moment of emotion, emotion which blazes for a while, but then dies as quickly as it came.

Don't get me wrong. emotion is a necessary factor in the Christian life, but a commitment to Jesus which is just based on emotion is useless.

In this respect we can liken Christian commitment to the kind of commitment couples make to one another in marriage. Marriage is more than about the emotion of love - it is about commitment to love the other whether or not one feels loving.

Marriage is a serious business. In the words of the marriage service puts it: *“Therefore it ought not to be entered upon lightly or unadvisedly, but thoughtfully & reverently”*

The same is true of following Jesus.

***Jesus wants realists - not romantics.***

Indeed, he once told a parable to this effect: **“If one of you is planning to build a tower, you sit down first and work out what it will cost, to see if you have enough money to finish the job”** (14.28).

I.e. before you follow Jesus, before you become a disciple of his, you need to count the cost - for following Jesus is a costly business

Sometimes preachers paint an all too rosy picture of the Christian life.

They say: *“Come to Jesus and all will be well. Come to Jesus and you will know a joy and a peace that you have never known before. Come to Jesus and you will know life in all its fullness”.*

All this is true. But there is another side of the coin. There is a cross to bear.

In the words of Jesus: **“Anyone who wants to come with me must forget self, take up their cross every day and follow me”** (Lk 9.23).

What does this cost mean in practical terms?

The cost can be defined in four simple steps. It involves

- ❑ **a willingness to have done with wrong** - this is not easy - it can be quite costly to give up old habits that go against the Christian ethic
- ❑ **a willingness to put Jesus first** in terms of what we do with our money or with our time - indeed, what we do with our lives.
- ❑ **a willingness to be known as a Christian** - this too is not easy - it can be quite costly to take a stand for Christ at work or at school. Will people tomorrow know where you have been today?
- ❑ **A willingness to serve Jesus** – both within the church and beyond the church

The fact is that it is not easy being a disciple of Jesus - discipleship is costly.

For Jesus has to come first

But in the words of a great missionary pioneer CT Studd: *“If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him”*

The benefits outweigh any investment we might make.

## 2. JESUS CALLS US TO FOLLOW HIM NOW

Having counted the cost and thought it all through, Jesus wants us to begin to follow him today - and not put it off until tomorrow

The importance of this comes to expression in Jesus' encounter with the second would-be follower. Jesus **“said to another man, ‘Follow me’. But that man said, ‘Sir, first let me bury my father’”** (9.59).

That sounds a very reasonable excuse. You would expect to Jesus to say *“I’m so sorry”* and to begin to offer his sympathy.

But instead Jesus replies: **“Let the dead bury their own dead. You go and proclaim the Kingdom of God”** (9.60)

Did Jesus really mean that this man should not attend his father's funeral?

It is possible that this is what he meant.

It is possible that Jesus was saying: *“If you want to follow me, you must follow me now. For by the time the funeral and the wake are over, I’ll be far away”*.

But such a scenario is unlikely. For if the father had just died, it is almost certain that the man would not have seen Jesus - he would have been busy preparing for the funeral. For in the Middle East, then as now, the interval between death & burial is very short - the funeral normally takes place on the same day as the death.

It's quite different from here, where ten days or more tends to elapse - indeed, I'm told that in the case of the Duke of Wellington, he was buried some three months after his death. Wow, he must have begun to smell!

***The probability is that the man's father was not dead*** - indeed he was not even dying. The man in effect was saying, *“I’ll follow you, once I no longer have family obligations”*.

The story is told of a brilliant young Arab who was offered a scholarship at a British university. He replied: *“I will take it after I have buried my father”*. Yet at the time his father was not much more than 40 and probably had many years to live.

*“I’ll follow you - but later, not now”* said the man.

(Lk 9.57-62)

But Jesus replies: “**Let the dead bury their own dead**”. I.e. don’t delay in committing yourself to me and to my cause. Follow me now.

Yes, as we have seen, there is a place for counting the cost - for thinking through the implications of Christian commitment.

For most people today the business of putting our trust in Christ involves a process. For this reason, for instance, we run Alpha courses.

People are given time to explore the implications of the Christian faith.

But ***the time comes when we need to make a decision to follow Jesus***.

Unfortunately many people want to sit on the fence.

Like Christopher Robin they want to sit on the stairs

*Halfway down the stairs  
Is a stair  
Where I sit.  
There isn't  
Any other stair  
Quite like it.  
I'm not at the bottom,  
I'm not at the top;  
So this is the stair  
Where I always stop*

I wonder whether there is someone here who is a bit of a Christopher Robin.

You would like to be a Christian - but you just can't make up your mind.

You are not sure whether or not you are ready to make such a commitment – after all, you have perhaps a family to care for, a career ladder to climb.

Or you are perhaps not 100% certain of Jesus - you may have some doubts.

But surely this is where faith comes in - for it is only when we step out that we find the rightness of our decision is confirmed.

It's a bit like getting married - even the most devoted couple can have doubts before the wedding, but if they kept postponing the marriage, then they would never get married!

Jesus says: “**Let the dead bury their dead**”

Jesus is not saying that we should not love our parents

Rather he is emphasising the need for decision.

If that man did not follow him then, then he would never follow him

So “**Let the dead bury the dead**”.

I.e. leave the spiritually dead to bury the spiritually dead.

But as for you, “**go and proclaim the Kingdom of God**”, go and tell others that God has come to us in Christ

### 3. JESUS CALLS US TO FOLLOW HIM WHOLEHEARTEDLY

We now turn to the third would-be follower.

Here we learn that once we have counted the cost, once we have stepped out with Christ,

there is no turning back - rather we need to follow him wholeheartedly.

**“Someone else said, ‘I will follow you sir; but first let me say goodbye to my family’** (9.61).

This seems a natural enough reply. But Jesus discerns half-heartedness in the reply.

This man appears to want to follow him, but on his terms.

So Jesus replies: **“Anyone who starts to plough and then keeps looking back is of no use to the Kingdom of God”** (9.62).

The underlying thought here is that nobody can plough a straight furrow unless their mind is on the job - the moment they start to look around them, that moment they’ve had it - the furrow is no longer straight - the job has been well & truly botched.

I.e. Jesus through this ploughing metaphor was saying, *“If you want to follow me, then you must be wholehearted. In your discipleship, you must give it everything you’ve got”*

Christian discipleship involves 101% commitment from start to finish.

Although Jesus was speaking some 2000 years ago, his words are as relevant today as ever they were - indeed probably more relevant.

For what the Christian church today suffers from is nominalism - people who are Christian in name, but who are not wholehearted in their commitment.

They think of themselves as Christians, they turn up to church most Sunday mornings, but during the week their faith has little impact upon the way they live.

Their mind is not constantly fixed on Jesus. In no way can they be said to be living for him Monday through to Saturday, as well as Sunday.

But Jesus wants us to be his disciples - and his disciples are by definition wholehearted in their commitment - they are on fire for him - they are enthusiasts.

My mind goes to the words of the risen Christ to the church at Laodicea: **“I know what you have done; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other. But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit you out of my mouth”** (Rev 3.15,16)

I.e. as far as Jesus is concerned there are no half-measures. It is all or nothing.

Jesus wants us to be 101% committed - now and forever.

He calls us to give ourselves wholeheartedly in his service.

As I said at the beginning, it is indeed a ‘big ask’.

But the benefits far outweigh the cost.

For Jesus said that those who followed him would have a share in God’s kingdom

For there is a world to come – and in that world where pain and suffering are no more the followers of Jesus will have a place.

Yes, Jesus through his life, death and resurrection has broken the vicious power of sin and death – and to those who follow him life is assured.

God willing, Adom-Nuako, Gabriel & Oliver will want to follow this Jesus

God willing, each one of us present this morning will resolve to follow him too.