

Come Follow Me

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[0 : 00] Jesus said, come and follow me. It was 30 years ago, almost to the day, that I had a conversation with Jeff.

Jeff was a builder. He was also a youth leader at the church where I grew up on the Isle of Wight. And it was the summer 1994.

I'd just graduated and I was about to start my first job as a youth worker in Billericay in Essex. And in the summer between finishing college and starting my new job, I was asked if I would go and be chaplain to this boys' brigade camp, which our church was involved with.

And so I was very happy to help out with that. Jeff and his wife June were youth leaders in the church where I grew up.

And every Sunday evening, they would open their home. And myself, along with quite a large number of teenagers, would fill their front room.

[1 : 24] We would drink all their tea, eat all their chocolate biscuits, and occasionally do some Bible study. But it was the summer of 1994. And the camp that I'd been involved with was just coming to an end.

And we were driving back in Jeff's van. We had some of the camping stuff in the back of the van. Jeff was driving. I was sat there in the passenger seat. We were driving from Swanage in Dorset back to the Isle of Wight.

And Jeff, who is no longer with us, but Jeff and I had this conversation about faith, about ministry, about youth work.

He knew I was about to start as a youth worker. And he knew that it was in the very early stages of me trying to work out what God was saying to me about the rest of my life.

And he knew that I felt that that probably meant that I was going to become a minister at some point. And I'll never forget what Jeff said to me. These weren't his exact words, but it went more or less like this.

[2 : 34] He said, really, Russell, whether you become a minister or a youth worker, or like me, you're a builder, just as a Christian, it all really boils down to one thing.

We've got to tell people about Jesus. Now, that was a conversation that took place 30 years ago, and I still remember it. And I'm going to be honest, I don't remember much else about probably the many things that Jeff and his wife, Jim, would have said to us over the years of being in the youth group that they led.

But I think they were probably quite pleased if 30 years later, that was the one and only thing that I remember. Because it is absolutely true.

It's all about Jesus. I'm reminded of a vicar who arrived on the first day of the new appointment, and he apparently went into the vestry with the church wardens and said, I need to tell you now, I've only got three sermons.

The first one is entitled, Come to Jesus. The second one is entitled, Come Back to Jesus. And the third one is entitled, Come Closer to Jesus.

[3 : 56] But first and last, everything in between, that's what it's about. Take Jesus out of the gospel and there's no gospel.

It's not about religion. It's not about rules. It's not about ritual. It's about relationship. With one. Jesus. And so we begin with those words, Come, follow me. Because that's what it's about. Following him.

Now, there are lots of other times where Jesus actually said, Go. We sent people into places. That's another sermon. But right now, we're thinking of these words, right at the beginning of his ministry, as he called ordinary people to follow him, in that oh so simple, yet so profound way.

Come, follow me. They're words of invitation. And they're words of invitation to know something that is so fundamentally true that we can so easily forget.

[5 : 16] And that, actually, in many ways, this series which we're just beginning is all about. Jesus said, The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.

In other words, that invitation into his presence. When Jesus says, Come, he's coming into knowing his presence.

Knowing that Jesus is, I was going to say there, but knowing that Jesus is here. That there's no place, no situation, at any stage of life, that you will find yourself where he's not already there.

Because that's his promise. Come and follow me. Because he's there. That's absolutely vital.

Whatever situation you might be facing right now, whether it's good, bad, or a mix of the two, and it probably is, whatever you might be hoping for or living in fear of, you're not alone.

He's with you. And that invitation, and it's a daily one that we need to hear and be reminded of, to come follow me, is the invitation that reminds us that there is no place, no situation, no set of circumstances that you will ever find yourselves in where he is not already present.

[6 : 49] The kingdom of God is near, is at hand. And it is knowing his presence that makes all the difference. Apparently, Wellington once said of Napoleon, his presence on the battlefield is like that, more than that, of 40,000 other soldiers.

such was the presence, the charisma, the power of that one individual that he had such an impact. I dare say we can draw on many other examples from human history. But when we're talking about Jesus, yes, we are talking about human history, but we are not only talking about human history, we are talking about the divine, the absolute truth, that which is ultimate and unique, the author of the entire universe and the sustainer of it, the one who has always been there and always will be, is there, is here, with you.

And those words of Jesus that say, come follow me, are words that remind us to stay close to that fundamental promise that he's present.

It's easy to say that. It's also very easy to forget that reality. And, in many ways, discipleship is about finding ways of sustaining that awareness because it can be so challenging.

[8 : 48] sustaining and growing and growing in that awareness that Jesus is always there with you. Because when you know that you are in his presence, you act differently.

We do. When we know that he's not in some other distant place, but he's not in heaven looking down at us, but he's actually with us and in us, when we know that, we live that out differently. Our responses are different. So, in many ways, growing as a disciple of Jesus is growing in that knowledge of his presence.

But that can be the challenge. Now, we may perhaps vary depending on how and where and in what situations we will find that particularly challenging.

but I would suggest to you that one of the times where it is most commonly felt a challenge is first thing in the morning. In that window of time between waking and rising, when we're just surfacing to the reality that we are no longer asleep and we are now awake, and our minds begin to flood with all the many things that we are facing either in that day or over the next few days.

[10 : 14] They might be long-term things, they might be immediate-term things, but as we gradually wake up, so more and more of those things in the words of C.S. Lewis come rushing at us like wild animals.

And our task, as C.S. Lewis put it, first thing in the day, is to push those thoughts away and to focus on the presence of Jesus.

How do we do that? I'm not going to suggest that there's a simple formula to it, but some of the things we're going to be looking at over the next few weeks will be thinking about some strategies and some things that we can do about that.

But one thing I have found that works for me is as much as possible to try not to go, if we can, try not to go to screens first thing.

I can't remember where I came across this some while ago, but the principle of Scripture before screens is a good one. sometimes it's not necessarily possible because if your diary, your calendar's on the screen, you need to check if you've got to be somewhere, you might need to grab that screen.

[11 : 42] But the point is quite simple. The longer we are looking at a screen first thing in the morning, whether that's the phone, iPad, laptop, whatever, it's not going to help those thoughts that

come rushing at us first thing, that take us in so many directions.

And if, if, if we can push that back and resist it first thing, and instead turn to some words of Scripture, it hasn't got to be lots, we're not talking about whole chapters, although that can be a really helpful thing, but the point is, is if we can make the start of the day, that time of stillness as we invite God to remind us that we are not alone, it can make all the difference.

Come, follow me, says Jesus. Know that the kingdom is at hand. Of course, as Jesus says, come, follow me, let's remember to come back to what we were thinking about right at the start of our service this morning.

Those words, come, follow me, are all about decision making. Choosing to follow Jesus is the biggest and most foundational decision you will ever make.

Don't be tempted to think otherwise. because if you unpack the implications of accepting Jesus for everything that he claims to be as true, it shifts everything.

[13:27] Right through from whether you will marry somebody to who you will marry to decisions about children, right the way through to the most mundane, ordinary decisions that we make every day of our lives.

And everything in between. All of those big decisions, little decisions, medium sized decisions, directly or indirectly will be shaped and moulded by the most foundational decision that you can ever make.

And that is whether we follow Jesus. And it's for that reason that we need to remember that making the decision to follow Jesus is not just a one moment in time thing.

Jesus says repent, meaning turn around and believe the good news. It's about decisions. many years ago there was a fisherman by a lake who always seemed to catch way more fish than any other local fisherman.

And nobody could ever quite work out how he did it. One morning he was just loading up his boat, getting his nets ready and he was just about to set off, when a stranger by the shore said, do you mind if I come with you today?

[14:41] a fisherman who was a man of few words nodded and said, sure, come on board. They went across to the other side of the lake, the fisherman didn't say a word to this stranger.

Eventually he stopped his boat. He made his way to a wooden box and lifted up the lid and pulled out a stick of dynamite.

he lit the fuse, he waited a few moments and he threw it as far as he possibly could into the water. Kaboom! Thousands of fish made their way to the surface, threw his nets and pulled them in. Which point the stranger pulled out an ID card one.

He said, I'm the game warden and you are well and truly under arrest. The fisherman said nothing. He just carried on bringing in the fish, eventually reached down to the box, picked out another stick of dynamite, lit the fuse, waited a few seconds and gave it to the game warden and looked at him and said, are you going to sit there or are we going to fish?

[16:06] There are some moments where you have to make a decision. And it seems to be that when it comes to making a decision about God, we're very good at deceiving ourselves into thinking that can be put on hold.

How often will you meet somebody who will say, well, I'm just agnostic. I don't really know and I don't think it's possible to know. And sometimes people say, no, I'm fine with that. Don't say that to discredit anybody's integrity, but there are some decisions, rather like the stick of dynamite, that have to be made.

Jesus is either who he claims to be or he's not. and if he is, we need to do something about him. Decision making is at the very core of being a disciple of Jesus. But it's not just a one-time decision. of course there is that, perhaps that moment where we make that change from not being a follower of Jesus to being a follower of Jesus. But let's not think that we can look back and think that it was a one-point frozen-in-time moment.

[17:49] Because those words come, follow me are words that come our way every single day in every decision we make. And our calling is to work out how, knowing the presence of Jesus with us, we respond to every decision so that we are following him in every decision that we make.

And lastly, let's remember that what we're talking about here is not someone else's decision. It's a decision that comes to each and every one of us.

it's too easy for us to think that the gospel is somebody else's good news. That it's a message that was intended for somebody else but not for me.

See, notice the immediacy of the response that those first disciples make to Jesus. Those first followers of Jesus, there's no hanging around.

they just leave their boats and nets behind and go. We don't need to be fishermen to follow Jesus and we may not be talking about laying down boats and nets, but all of us will have something.

[19 : 16] And again, all of us will have something every day of our lives that we are called to lay down in order to follow him. And our question is, what is that? And that will probably look a little bit different for each and every one of us because we are all different.

But we need to remember that this challenge, this invitation, come follow me, with Jesus at the centre is something for each and every one of us with absolutely no exception.

You see, those first followers of Jesus knew that Jesus was speaking to them personally. Let me share one last story with you before we come to pray.

There's a story about Bishop Taylor Smith, who was a former chaplain general to the forces. He had a conversation one day with a young man that went like this.

Bishop Taylor Smith said, when you think about the cross of Christ, what do you see? The young man thought and replied to him, I see Christ and I see two thieves crucified either side of him.

[20 : 41] The bishop replied, what else do you see? The young man thought some more and he said, I see the soldiers gambling. Bishop said this, if that is all you see, I think you will have trouble with the Christian life.

When I see the cross, with all that, I see old Bishop Taylor Smith. I was crucified with Christ.

These words, come, follow me, are close up and personal. As close up and intimate as it can possibly get. So as we come to pray now, let's ask God to bring those words close up and personal to us, that we might bring our lives closer to him and to grow in him.

So let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that you come to us in Jesus, not to be religious, not to engage in rules or ritual, but to know you and to know that we are known and loved by you.

Lord, as we think of our lives now and we think of the mess we make, the mistakes we make and how we get it wrong over and over again, we just bring the reality of our lives before you now.

[22 : 24] We confess the reality of our sin and brokenness. forgiveness. And we ask of your forgiveness. Lord, we thank you that because of Christ and his death and resurrection, we may know that we are forgiven.

So help us to walk in freedom. Help us to follow you in our everyday lives. To know and to grow in your living presence with us.

Help us to know that you go before us in every situation that we face tomorrow, this week, and in the time to come. And as we do so, help us to grow more and more and more into the people that you want us to be.

In Jesus' name. Amen.