

Follow Me - 18th July 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Hey everyone and welcome to our Scorchio Sunday session. It's a warm one out there so stick another ice cube in your cordial and let's try and stay cool together.

My name is Matt, the Vigorous St John's, and this has been our weekly web-based way of keeping connected during these long lockdown months. Although with restrictions lifting, this will be the last of these YouTube sessions for the time being. Do watch this space though, best of all subscribe to this channel to keep up with whatever further YouTube stuff will hopefully appear from September onwards. As I outlined last time, we're planning on some summer in-person gatherings at St John's from next week. In a nutshell, alternating Sunday morning socials with some low-key evening worship services. The tone is going to be pretty cautious so we'll be outside in the mornings as much as possible since we're fortunate to have Chase Terrace Park just next door. And then we'll still be expecting masks, hand sanitiser and distancing wherever possible while indoors.

The rising trajectory of infection, requirement to isolate and hospital cases is not good though. So we're trying to balance the risks with the reward of being able to gather after so long.

Obviously, people's wellbeing is paramount. Wellbeing which encompasses our mental and social health as well as our physical health. So there's a lot to weigh up for each of us in the weeks ahead.

We're planning on opening up but we will be assessing things on a week-by-week basis. Letters have gone out to all St John's folks over the last few days explaining all of this in more detail and I've put the letter up on Facebook and our church website too so do check that out, especially if Postman Pat and his black and white cat hasn't yet delivered yours if you're on our mailing list. A week feels a long time though since last Sunday, certainly in terms of the football and all the post-match inquests most seriously on the horrendous racist abuse many of the players were subjected to. We pray that through this whole experience all of the team and support staff will know God's strength and sustaining love in these challenging times. Indeed I think my thought was that if England had won, the issues surrounding racism and taking the knee would probably have been swept under the carpet more easily. So in many ways if England's defeat has brought these issues increasingly into the light, then that can only be a good thing as again we pray that this might be a watershed moment in the struggle for racial justice and equality in our country.

[2 : 5 8] I would gladly take the knee. Indeed it's much more than a gesture as kneeling is a practice which has a long association with prayer, kneeling before a holy God and in solidarity with those we live alongside. So may God's justice roll as we seek the will and the way to rid our land of racism.

We're going to round off this particular season here on YouTube though today. Week 70. There have been 73 sessions in total so quite a stretch. Indeed thank you God for being with us in this way throughout this time and we ask that your voice would be as clear as ever as we focus once again on you today. Amen.

So over recent weeks we've looked at all four of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and I figured today would be a good day to focus on one common theme, one common phrase which runs through each of these gospels. It's the request, the encouragement, the invitation from Jesus to follow me.

This follow me phrase appears in each of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. So in Matthew we see it right at the start of Jesus' decision to call his disciples saying to these two fraternal fishermen Peter and Andrew, come follow me and I will send you out to fish for people.

Then in Mark's gospel we read about an encounter Jesus has with a particularly rich man, someone who we're told had great wealth and yet this wealth didn't cloud Jesus' opinion of him. No, for we're told Jesus looked at him and loved him. But then Jesus goes on, one thing you lack he said, go sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.

[5 : 10] Well how about in Luke and sticking on a financial theme we're told Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. Follow me, Jesus said to him. And Levi got up, left everything and followed him. And then there's John. When again he records a time early in Jesus' ministry when Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, follow me.

Peter and Andrew, this anonymous rich man, Levi, known elsewhere as Matthew, and then Philip. Four occasions among many when Jesus calls people to follow him. There's no coercion on Jesus' part though. No, it's left up to the individual to choose how they might respond. Sometimes the response is positive. Peter and Andrew did indeed leave their nets to follow Jesus. Levi left his tax booth to follow him. Philip, whatever he was doing, probably fisherman Phil since he came from Galilee, he chose to follow Jesus and even then found his friend Nathaniel so that Nathaniel could follow Jesus too.

So there's a positive response to Jesus' invitation but there is at times a negative response too, not least with this rich man in Mark. He bucks the trend since after being encouraged by Jesus to sell his possessions, sell his possessions, give his money to the poor and follow him, we're told.

At this, the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth. This man chose not to follow Jesus. In fact, he went away in the opposite direction, unwilling to leave his old ways of wealth behind in order to go on a new adventure with Jesus.

You know, I always feel for this rich man. Yes, he was cripplingly materialistic but what an opportunity he passed up. I wonder how often he regretfully replayed that refusal in his head.

[7 : 24] Perhaps that's why we're not told his name. A merciful omission from the gospel writers in order to save him from being identified forever as the guy who had to live with choosing money over Jesus.

Perhaps he changed his mind in the years which followed. Let's hope so. But it's interesting to contrast this bloke with Levi. Both rich men, both called by Jesus to leave a lot behind.

But only Levi, the one whose name we are given, was willing to forego their riches in order to follow Jesus. I know for me there's a lesson here, perhaps for you too, of not letting wealth or a desire for financial security hinder us from going first with Jesus. You know, we often hear of these get-rich-quick schemes in Bitcoin or property investment or whatever, where the promise on offer is to be financially free. Financial freedom, we're told, means accumulating enough wealth to not have to worry. And yet financial freedom for Jesus, certainly in his calling of Levi and this rich man to follow him, is being prepared to leave behind that desire for wealth and the false kind of security it brings. It's actually financially freeing in Jesus' eyes to give our money away to those in need, rather than constantly trying to accumulate more and more for ourselves.

Now, following Jesus doesn't mean we're daft or frivolous with money. No, elsewhere Jesus talks about the virtues of good stewardship. But the way of Jesus is characterised by extravagant, cheerful generosity where it really is more blessed to give than receive. I don't know where Jesus might be calling you or I to follow him, but I suspect if our desire for financial security means we're not taking the plunge in our faith, if we're not living generous, courageous lives, then we're at risk of being not like Levi, but being like this rich man who went away sad because he had great wealth.

I know which of these two people I'd rather be, and maybe you do too. What else is there in this follow me phrase though? Well, as we see with Levi, with Philip, even in the spurned invitation to the rich man, it's a phrase of incredible brevity. Just two words. Follow me.

[10:09] That's it. No information of where they're going, no promise of reward, but no threat of retribution if they refuse either. It's not follow me and everything will be rosy, but neither is it follow me or else.

No, it's just follow me. I mean, as invitations go, it's understated at best. And even on the rare occasions, Jesus does add something after follow me, such as with his calling of Peter and Andrew, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people, he says.

It's mysteriously, even frustratingly vague. Fish for people? What does that mean? It's almost like a riddle Jesus sets, designed perhaps to intrigue as opposed to inform.

And yet it seems to me there's no need for us to overcomplicate things because at the same time we can take this follow me phrase on face value, since it essentially means follow my lead.

It's Jesus' way of saying, look, spend time with me. Learn to think like I think. Learn to do the things I do. It's a way of discipleship. Indeed, the root of the Greek word used in the New Testament, which we translate as disciple means to learn. And so to follow is to learn.

[11:36] When Jesus says, follow me, therefore, he means come, learn from me. How does he expect people to learn from him? Well, in the time of Jesus, the main way disciples learned to be like their teacher, their rabbi, was through imitation.

The common idea was that if you were someone's follower, their apprentice, their disciple, you would spend as much time as possible with them, shadowing them, almost stalking them.

I mean, there are some disciples of other rabbis from the time of Jesus who were said to have taken this idea to extremes. So there are stories of one rabbi's disciple following him to the toilet.

Another one even hid under the marital bed of his rabbi so he could, in quotes, learn. I don't think Jesus had that kind of following in mind.

Otherwise, he'd have had to take out a rabbi's restraining order or something. Rather, the idea is that by journeying so closely with Jesus, his behaviour, his attitudes, his character can almost seep into us as his followers.

[12:50] Perhaps that's why Jesus says at one point, take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Because a yoke is the bar which binds two oxen together, ensuring that they're in step, in line, in tandem with one another.

That's the idea, it seems, of learning from Jesus. Following his lead, yeah, but doing so by being closely bound to him. Now, what does this mean for us?

Well, it seems to me that in terms of our faith, following Jesus is therefore as much about putting his ways into practice than it is about how we feel.

You know, we hear a lot sometimes about the importance of opening our hearts to Jesus or having a personal relationship with him. And those are fine things to talk about.

But interestingly, they're not the first thing Jesus actually invites us to do. Now, in fact, not once in the Gospels does Jesus say, let me into your heart.

[13 : 59] Now, instead, Jesus simply says time and again, follow me. Because he seems to recognise that it's as we place our feet in his footsteps, as we learn to imitate him, as his spirit helps to shape our attitudes, our behaviours, our character, so our hearts will automatically become increasingly open to the reality of Jesus and his love for us.

In terms of our relationship with Jesus, it would seem behaviour begets belief. Our footsteps, if you like, will foster our faith.

I think this idea also helps to make sense of Jesus' command at the end of Matthew's Gospel for us to go and make disciples. As the writer Nick Page puts it, Go and make disciples does not mean go and tell people more and more facts about me, or go and get people to agree with a load of statements about me.

It means go and show people what it is to be like me. Go and make apprentices. We can't force people to feel a certain way about God.

Forced feelings are the last thing faith can be about. But we can inspire their interest and alert their attentiveness to God by showing them what it means to be like Jesus.

[15 : 30] And that modelling, that demonstration, that example, well, for me, that's probably the most effective form of faith sharing there is. Now, the good news of living out this kind of life which follows Jesus is that it helps to keep us on track with God even when we feel our own faith is faltering.

You see, I'm fully aware that these past 18 months or so will have challenged many of us in our understanding of God and church and faith in general.

Having so much taken off us in terms of community and church life, support structures, routines and roles and so on. Well, it's not surprising if we're unsure of quite how or whether we even want to return to the kind of faith understanding or experience we had before.

And yet, I think I want to say, if you are feeling like that, if you are feeling uncertain or unsettled, please don't worry. I mean, for a start, for those of us who might say our faith has been rocked by the pandemic, whilst I understand those feelings, I'm tempted to say, good.

I'm glad it's been rocked. Because if our faith was built on the idea that following Jesus protects us from harm or doesn't raise more questions than it answers or that unless we go to church or feel inspired in our faith, then God is somehow less present.

[17 : 03] Well, perhaps those ideas were the wrong principles, the wrong beliefs, the wrong understandings of God to be putting our faith in in the first place. Maybe, just maybe, one of the ways God is bringing good out of this dreadful pandemic is by digging out the false foundations of our faith in order to rebuild our house on Jesus, the truly solid rock and the firmest foundation for our faith.

But then, connected to this, even if our well-founded faith has suffered over these past 18 months, whether from the lack of meaningful fellowship, the absence of communal worship, our inability to receive sustenance from those we've previously drawn strength from and so on, the good news is that Jesus' call to follow me remains as strong now as it did when we first heard his voice.

You see, if we take the example of Peter in the gospel accounts, Jesus' foremost follower, his journey with Jesus both begins and ends with these follow me words ringing in his ears.

As we saw, Jesus' first recorded words to Peter in the first gospel we have, Matthew, were follow me, Matthew 4.19. But what's fascinating is that Jesus' final words to Peter in the fourth and final gospel we have, John, are also identical.

Follow me, says Jesus. John 21.22. I mean, after all that Peter had been through, after all of the ways his faith had been both strengthened and stretched, Jesus ends as he begins with the same invitation, follow me.

[18 : 57] And that means that the way perhaps for us to know whatever rekindling, whatever relighting, whatever restoration we need in our faith, well, it's simply but soundly to obey this same call to follow Jesus.

As we've seen, following Jesus is not so much dependent on how we feel as it is about what we do. Following Jesus' lead in, say, feeding the hungry, supporting the lonely, the oppressed, caring for the sick, lifting the load of those who are struggling, and so on.

And that, I would say, is good news because as we follow Jesus in those active, practical ways, so the way we might be feeling about our faith, the way we might be feeling about Jesus, we'll be transformed by the blessing we receive from first seeking to give to others.

That's the way God's economy works. It is more blessed to give than receive, so if our faith is floundering or even just a bit flat, that's all the more reason to serve one another because it's in doing so that the feel-good factor in our own faith can once again be fired up.

This principle is reflected in words Jesus shared in the temple courts as we're told that when Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world.

[20 : 27] Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Following Jesus, following his lead, putting his priorities into practice, that's the way of light which banishes darkness.

That's ultimately the way of life. Following Jesus doesn't necessarily mean we get to know where we're going or where Jesus will take us. That's his business, not ours.

And as we saw, Jesus simply says, follow me without offering much more of an explanation than that. But that's okay. Indeed, that's the adventure because there's no one better, no one higher, no one greater in whom we can place our trust than Jesus.

And so as we embark on this next phase of our life of faith together and with God, let's be encouraged because not only is Jesus right behind us and beside us, he's also well ahead of us, before us, calling us on to follow him because he alone knows the way ahead.

Indeed, with all that we've been thinking about in mind, we're going to draw this particular YouTube season to a close with one of the all-time great hymns which the St John's band have put together for us this week.

[21 : 58] It's the song How Great Thou Art. O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the world thy hand hath made.

I see the stars I hear the rolling thunder Thy power throughout The universe displayed
Then sings my soul My Saviour God to thee How great Thou art How great Thou art
Then sings my soul My Saviour God to thee How great Thou art How great Thou art
And when I think

That God, his Son, not sparing Sent him to die I scarce can take it in
That on the cross My burden gladly bearing He bled and died To take away my sin
There sings my soul My Saviour God to thee How great Thou art How great Thou art
Then sings my soul My Saviour God to thee How great Thou art

How great Thou art And when I think That God, his Son, not sparing Sent him to die
I scarce can take it in That on the cross My burden gladly bearing He bled and died
To take away my sin To take away my sin Then sings my soul My Saviour God to thee

How great Thou art How great Thou art Then sings my soul My Saviour God to thee
How great Thou art How great Thou art When Christ shall come With shouts of acclamation
And take me home And take me home What joy shall fill my heart Then I shall bow

[27 : 00] In humble adoration In humble adoration And may proclaim My God how great Thou art
Then sings my soul My Saviour God to thee How great Thou art How great Thou art And
sings my soul My Saviour God to thee How great Thou art How great Thou art How great
Thou art How great Thou art How great Thou art

How great Thou art How great Thou art How great Thou art How great Thou art How great
Thou art How great Thou art Smashing stuff And my heartfelt thanks to all the singers and
musicians who've played their part in producing the 72 songs which make up our worship
playlist here on YouTube.

More to come, I'm sure, in the future. But for now, do make the most of that resource as a
super soundtrack to your summer. There's no extra time today but there's a playlist of
previous extra time sessions to dip into should you wish as well as all of the previous
Sunday sessions and Lottie's Sunday Stars sessions too just shy of 250 videos on this
channel as a whole.

We'll take a break there for now but thank you for all of your engagement and
encouragement so far. Our journey with Jesus continues so we'll see what the future
brings as we commit to following Him together.

Indeed, before a final word of blessing I just want to finish with a quote from Brian
McLaren as food for thought for this next phase of our faith journey. In his book called We
Make the Road by Walking he says this Our faith was never intended to be a destination a
status, a holding tank or a warehouse.

[29 : 41] Instead, it was to be a road, a path a way out of old and destructive patterns into new and
creative ones. As a road or way it is always extended into the future.

If a spiritual community only points back to where it's been or if it only digs in its heels
where it is now it is a dead end of a car park not a way.

To be a living tradition, a living way it must forever open itself forward and forever remain
unfinished even as it forever cherishes and learns from the growing treasury of its past.

And so, may the blessing of God the Father God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with
you be with me be with us as the unfinished but forward facing people of God and as we
obey Jesus' call to follow me may we be a living blessing to all those who we share this
life with both now and always.

Amen.