

Follow Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everyone. As Nick has said, we're kicking off our annual vision series today. This one is, in my view, particularly special because it's the final one for Follow 25.

Follow 25, if you're relatively new around here, is our five-year strategic plan that was launched four years ago to see the majority of us at St Paul's growing in faith, growing in God confidence.

And over the past five years or four years, we have learnt quite a lot in terms of what does that look like in our day and age.

And so this vision series, we're going to build on that work by digging a bit deeper into how we follow Jesus here at St Paul's in this season, 21st century, as we live out our purpose of treasuring Jesus together for the joy of all people, which is our purpose statement.

It's our statement which tries to capture, if you like, both the great commandment and the great commission. That is, the great commandment to love God and love people and to make disciples of all nations.

[1 : 21] So, you know, worship God, love each other, and serve the world. That's really what the three things that we're on about here at St Paul's. And so as we do that in our vision series, we are planning to take our collective next step to see lives flourish in Jesus in our city.

And the key to that, which we want to get down to the nitty-gritty through this vision series, that for us to see lives flourishing and for us to collectively take our next step, we individually need to be intentionally taking our next step to grow as disciples of Jesus.

So the thrust of what I am calling us to over the course of this term is to intentionally practice rhythms of grace, what have been called godly habits, spiritual disciplines over the centuries.

And this is a need for all of us. None of us have got any of this right. Some of us are stuck in a rut and happy to be there.

Some of us don't even realise we're stuck in a rut. So my call throughout this series will be for us to intentionally follow Jesus and to fulfil his purpose for us in life.

[2 : 50] And that is that we would be transformed into his image day by day. Now, this is my 15th vision series at St Paul's.

It's been my privilege and my honour to lead St Paul's for almost 16 years now. It'll be coming up real soon. The Ad of Mercy for that. You're not marking it.

It's in my calendar. I am so, so personally confident that pursuing intentional Jesus, intentional discipleship in Jesus Christ is so absolutely right in terms of what God has called us to.

It is my strong conviction after nearly three decades of pastoral ministry that treasuring Jesus above everything else is what we all need and to do it in every aspect of life to him to be, for us to fully surrender to him is what every one of us needs to do and yet it's the thing that is often lacking in Western Christianity.

You may or may not remember but back when I launched Follow 25, my personal commitment was that I was going to read the Old Testament once and Psalms and New Testament twice every year for the course of Follow 25 and so far I've been on track for the past four years and it's become more of a habit now and much easier to do after four years of slogging away at it.

[4 : 34] I'm glad I've done it. Over the past four years, in conjunction with that, I have faced many personal challenges that have forced me to go deeper in understanding myself of seeing areas that needed to be changed in my life and working on those areas.

And I'm grateful for God and his spirit. I'm grateful for the community of saints who have assisted and walked with me and mentors and coaches who have helped me through that process.

And so after four years of following Christ in this process, of Follow 25, I have seen change in my life. I feel more stable and content.

I have more mystery in life, in the things of God. I feel like I'm more restful in him after four years of Follow 25. And yet, I come to this series very conscious.

After walking with Jesus for over three decades, I struggle day by day to live out the life of discipleship. I am like you, a sheep before I am a shepherd.

[6 : 07] I'm conscious of the setbacks. I'm conscious of the apathy and the battle in my life to change. And after 16 years of leading St. Paul's, for those who've been around the whole time of that, you know that.

You can see straight through me. That's the difficulty of standing up here almost week after week after week. I feel exposed and vulnerable as I call us to surrender everything to Jesus.

I am a sheep like you and I struggle to do that too. I can bring it to you with an element of sharpness and clarity and humour and conviction and yet struggle to do it myself.

I'm a flawed saint journeying with you. For instance, I need to crucify the love of praise and affirmation every day.

I have to crucify the desire to make a name for myself rather than a name for Christ. I am drawn to security and comfort and possessions.

[7 : 29] I struggle with some of the fears at 55 that I struggled with at 15 and I'm frustrated by the lack of change in those areas, the fear of rejection.

The fear of rejection. The fear of looking foolish. I have battled personal insecurity, identity and social anxiety all of my life.

I am prone to self-pity. I feel it quickly if I don't get the love and the respect the way that I want to. I'm a lover of progress and productivity and so I constantly battle the guilt around the use of my time.

procrastination is one thing that I hate about myself. I'm generally quick on critical analysis and problem solving and decision making and slower on listening and compassion.

[8 : 35] I love to praise God with you in this setting and I'm very conscious that I feel a constraint in my own soul when it's just me and God.

I constantly question the motives of my heart and so I question the motives of yours and others too. I've loved my wife imperfectly for 26 years.

and my children imperfectly for 17 years. I want to know God. I want to know myself and I want to see the gap and the difference between who I am and what he's called me to.

And so I say all of that and have it included everything just simply to say I'm with you and I invite you to take your next step with me.

In the embrace of our Saviour who knows us Saviour who is gentle and humble and tender towards flawed saints like me and you as we are made more in his image this year.

[10 : 00] so you will hear tenderness in this series but you will also hear or feel some boots up the backside.

It's in the context of a tender boot if you like because after 16 years of leading St Paul's I can say that some of us here have not even moved to scratch.

I can say in reflecting in 16 years there's been no change in some people at St Paul's in 16 years.

Your value systems are still the same your habits are still the same your priorities are still the same. in fact for some of us here I'm actually seeing it get worse. I'm seeing a decline in discipleship.

There may be a growth in knowledge but don't make the mistake that a growth in knowledge means transformation.

That's the mistake of Western society. And so I invite you to come on this journey and take your next step.

[11 : 20] And so today we're really just going to start at the beginning of Christian discipleship where it all begins before we go into the details which is following Jesus.

And so four points today you'll see them up on the screen and the first point who is Jesus? Who do you say I am? That's the question Jesus asked his closest followers in Mark 8.

But just before that question he also asked them the question so who do other people say I am? What's people's opinion to me?

Now Jesus of Nazareth is undoubtedly the most popular most recognisable most quoted the most admired the most controversial figure in all of history and human society.

no other person has been more scrutinised or studied ever in the history of humanity. Entire philosophies and religion have been founded on his teaching.

[12:27] More books have been written about him than any other person who has ever lived. Every day his name is spoken more than any other name from affectionate admiration and worship to absent minded curses and denouncements.

The large figures of history have had to acknowledge him from communist dictators like Fidel Castro, Napoleon Bonaparte, Donald Trump, I mean name them, Caesar, Charlemagne, they've all had to reckon with Jesus Christ.

No message has ever been used or exploited more than that of Jesus Christ. Politicians grab some of his quotable quotes to prop up their political platform.

Every religion in the world, whether it be Christian or not, has to factor in some appraisal of Jesus himself. It might be to honour him as one of the God's great prophets or as an enlightened man or to reject him as a fraud or to hail him as the king of kings and the saviour of the world.

A person is more misunderstood, marginalised or commercialised than Jesus. He's been fictionalised in the last temptation of Christ, humanised in the passion of the Christ and satirised by the Simpsons and South Park.

[14:01] He's viewed as either a stern taskmaster or a moral jellyfish, willing to hand out forgiveness and to turn a blind eye to anyone, anyone who prays just a simple shallow prayer of confession only to live a life from that moment devoid of his presence at all.

And there's a summary of Western Christianity since the 1970s. you see, the point is, you get Jesus wrong and you get the meaning of the Christian faith and what it means to be Christian entirely wrong.

And Mark longs that we get an accurate picture of who Jesus is and what he came to do. So Mark 8, it's the pivotal chapter, take those off the screen, it just really freaking me out a little bit.

It's the pivotal chapter in the gospel. Jesus' early followers begin to see the true identity of who he is and in verse 29 Peter answers the big question of the identity of Jesus.

He is the Messiah. It's a word that literally means the anointed one. You're the anointed one. You're the Messiah. You're the Christ. You are the king to end all kings.

[15:36] You are the long promised ruler of the world and Jesus accepts the title. Doesn't reject it in any way.

But the next thing that comes out of Jesus' mouth is shocking. Verse 31, he then began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teacher of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

He spoke plainly about this and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. He must suffer.

And what he does here is he takes up not just the identity! He is given by Peter in this moment, but he actually applies a new one to himself when he calls himself the son of man, which is Daniel chapter 7 in the Old Testament.

The son of man in Daniel 7 is a divine Messiah figure who comes with the angels to put everything right in a world that's horribly wrong.

[16:46] The son of man in Daniel 7 is God himself in the world. So, how could the promised Messiah defeat evil and suffering and injustice by suffering, by dying?

The concept of a suffering Messiah, a dead Messiah, a dead rescuer, makes no sense. And yet Jesus is explicit.

He's planning to die. He's not predicting that he will die. I mean, we can all predict we will die.

There's no prophecy in that. I'm going to die. Ratio is one out of one.

He's a plan. It's one thing for Jesus to say that he will fight for justice and he will be defeated. It's another thing that he says that I will fight for injustice, I will overturn evil.

It's the very reason I came and the way I'm going to do that is through my death. He is the Messiah. But he came not to live and reign, but to die and reign.

[18:07] Not to take power, but to lose it. Not to subjugate, but to serve. And the word must there in those sentences controls the whole sentence.

It controls everything. It's the main word. Jesus must suffer. Jesus must be rejected. Jesus must be killed.

Jesus must be resurrected. All of those musts have to happen for humanity to be forgiven for crimes against God and saved from God's judgment and for evil to be defeated and for the world to be renewed.

And Peter takes Jesus aside and says, whose side are you on? And he condemns him in the strongest possible terms.

And Jesus says, get behind me, Satan. He speaks to one of his closest friends and gives him the name of his worst enemy.

[19 : 26] Don't you dare stand in the way of my mission. It makes no sense to Peter. But it does make perfect sense.

You see, Jesus' death makes perfect sense on a whole different levels. But let me just focus on one, the legal level. If you were to grab my phone right now, take it and break it so you destroyed it, there are two things that can happen in that moment.

Either I pay for it and I say to you, don't worry about it, it's fine, it's only an iPhone 12, there's 16 now.

I forgive you. If I do that for you, what happens in that moment is I pay the debt. I pay the debt. the other alternative is I say to you, you owe me a new iPhone 12. And in that instance, you pay the debt.

[20 : 41] The value of the phone itself doesn't just disappear, doesn't just go. Someone has to pay the debt. I can choose to forgive you and then I pay the debt.

And I can do that in a variety of ways. I can go out and I buy myself a new phone or I have to pay the debt by going back to paper and pens and pigeons or landlines, that kind of stuff.

I have to pay the debt that way. I would absorb the debt in some kind of way. And that works on every level of life.

If someone robs you of an opportunity of your happiness, or of your reputation or something else, what happens in there is a personal debt is accrued in that moment.

And there are only two choices in that moment. Either you make them pay by ruining their happiness, their reputation, their opportunities, or you can forgive them.

[21 : 50] Ever had the experience of forgiving someone in that scenario? How painfully hard it is? true forgiveness always requires suffering.

Always requires suffering. And so it makes no surprise that God would say the debt of humanity against God for crimes against their creator, for not living under his rule, God doesn't, you know, the moral jellyfish Jesus, ah, don't worry about it, you know, we'll all make it in the end, just get your own way, be fine.

That does not work in society. That does not work on a personal level in your life. Why would we expect God to do that? The only way that could, something would happen was God would say the only way I can forgive the sins of the human race is either cause them to suffer, judgment and punishment or I suffer.

The only way God can pardon us and not judge us is for him to come under his own judgment for our sin, for him to absorb the punishment himself and Jesus says that's what I'm here to do on the cross.

I must suffer. Jesus is God and King. He chooses to die to pay the debt that we owe him and that makes him not just the King of Kings, not just a mighty God, but a merciful and gracious and loving God.

[23 : 40] From the moment his public ministry commenced, Jesus called people to repent, that is stop walking away from God and come back to me, come back to him, to repent, to turn away from rejection and to find forgiveness and new life and a transformed life in him.

Right from the very go of his public ministry, Jesus was not interested in curious onlookers. he was not interested in converts to pray a shallow prayer of confession.

He was calling disciples, followers, fully committed, surrendered followers to himself. And he calls all of humanity down that same path now.

and some of us here, our very next step in life is to take that next step, to come to Jesus and we would love to talk to you about that.

the call here is to follow Jesus. Now the concept of discipleship was common in the Greek and Roman empires.

[25 : 00] The word disciple, which was not coined by Jesus, it's not a Christian term, the word disciple literally means a student or a learner. In the Jewish context, a disciple would take the posture of sitting and learning from their teacher and following them in their daily activities, daily duties.

What is interesting in Jewish culture, it was the student, the learner, who chose their master, their rabbi, the person that they were following.

And so there was a saying that a disciple should become dusty with the dust of their rabbi, dusty with the dust of their rabbi.

That is to follow them so closely in all of life that they would be covered in the dust that was stirred up from the feet of their teacher because they were just with them all the time.

And that concept has been flown over into the New Testament. the word Christian which was first used in the book of Acts to try and capture these people who were following Jesus and committed to Jesus.

[26 : 26] What do we call them? And the word Christian is a combination of two words from Latin and from Greek which means Christiane, followers of the Christ.

That's what the word Christian is. Followers of the Christ. And it speaks of a lifelong journey of following Jesus and a 100% dedication to him.

That's how he describes it in verse 34. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take a follow me. For whoever wants to save their life or lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

This is crucial. In this whole section of Mark 8, we are told that Jesus must die. And then Jesus says, well, actually, you must die if you follow me.

[27 : 42] Now, the word that is translated life, verse 35, let's just hone in there for a moment, is a word that means your identity, your personality, your selfhood.

He says in verse 36, what good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul or forfeit their very self?

self? Now, every culture in our world throughout history has pointed to certain things and says that if you gain those things or if you acquire those things, if you achieve those things or if you become like those things, then you will know who you truly are and you'll become valuable to us in this culture.

every culture says it differently, what those things are, but ultimately they say exactly the same thing, no matter what culture you come from, it says exactly the same things.

Your sense of self, of who you are, your identity is performance based. You achieve your identity.

[29 : 06] and if you perform well enough, you will find the love and the approval you desperately need to feel secure and valuable within that system.

And Jesus says here, if you gain the whole world, it will never be enough. Because as you are gaining the whole world to pursue your sense of self, you will entirely lose your sense of self in the process.

It's never going to be enough to make you know who you are because ultimately you're pursuing God. You're not pursuing God who has made you and relationship with him.

You're pursuing everything else, the whole world. Jesus did not come to recruit followers from one performance based identity into another performance based identity that's centered on him.

He wants us to lose the old performance based identity and base our sense of worth and value and self on him and what he has achieved for us.

[30 : 26] Fundamental to the Christian faith is a solid secure identity that we are God's much loved children through Jesus Christ and what he's achieved for us.

That is the Christian faith is a secure sense of self that is received. It's not achieved by religious performance. Notice verse 35 for whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

You see the foundation of following Jesus is the good news of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel. The gospel is something that is done for us in Jesus. It is God's grace to us from beginning to end. We believe and we receive and we live as followers of Jesus in the light of what he has 100% fully completely achieved for us.

It's essential to see Jesus Christ as the king of kings the son of man the divine the God the creator dying for us. If we simply just see him as a king on a throne who's calling us to obey then we will obey purely because it will be an obedience out of fear.

[31 : 54] That is just performance based religion and it is not the Christian faith. the Christian follows Jesus because they have received complete acceptance in him not because we're hoping to achieve it and receive it in the end.

He is the king who went to the cross for us and therefore we submit to him out of love trust and reverence. instead of negotiating with him what following him looks like we simply say Lord whatever you ask I will do whatever you send I will accept.

So that's who he is that's what he's called us to do what's his goal what's his goal verse 38 if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation the son of man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his father's glory with the holy angels what he's saying in this context of calling his disciples to fully commit to him and to follow him he's saying there is an end of all this there is a goal to it all and it's wrapped up in those words for the father's glory for the father's glory it gives us the goal of Jesus entire mission and the goal of his entire mission is not first and foremost about sinners being saved it's about sinners being saved for God's glory maybe you've never thought about it all at all before but

Jesus going to the cross was first and foremost not about you or me or humanity it was first and foremost about God's glory it was about his character being displayed to all the world Jesus came into the world to reveal the glorious character of God to a world that is intoxicated with its own glory and passion to gain the whole world the late English theologian pastor and author John Stott in his final book a book on whole hearted discipleship of Jesus wrote that in his early years as a Christian the question of what is God's purpose for me really dominated captivated him and his friends at the end of his life as he writes his final work that was published after his death he finally settles on the answer to that question the goal of salvation in

Jesus Christ God's purpose for his people is for them to become like their saviour Jesus Christ for the glory of God personal transformation is the goal he quotes Romans 8 28 29 in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose for those God fore knew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his son 2 Corinthians 3 18 and we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image where there!

[35 : 51] increasing glory 2 now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is and all who have that hope in him purify themselves now just as he is pure now if being changed transformed renewed in the image of Jesus is the purpose for which you have been saved through Jesus then it's no wonder he calls us to cooperate with him now to be a Christian is to become like Jesus the purpose of information in the

Christian faith is transformation to become like Jesus in his complete surrender to the father like Jesus in his life of service like Jesus in his love like Jesus in his patient endurance like Jesus in his mission to the world!

And yet the scholars the pastors the missiologists researchers in this are all saying the same thing very few people in the modern world who identify as Christians are taking the path of personal transformation into the image of Jesus and are more content instead with the superficiality and discipleship that identifies as being Christian intellectually and yet orientation practically are still trying to gain the whole world still trying to gain the whole world because their vision of Jesus is the moral jellyfish his job is love his job is grace that's what he does thank you

Jesus far too many in our modern world and we can brain the preachers for this have a view that the Christian life is just simply about sin management he deals with my sin that's what he does rather than being brought into a living relationship with our creator who plans to renew all things in the end including us and that is his goal for you right now personal transformation so how do we do! that's fundamentally what this series how do we follow Jesus basically what it means is we need to relearn a whole heap of things and we need to when I say relearn we need to reform a bunch of rhythms and habits in our lives over the decades Christians in the western church have been sucked into a culture of instant gratification we have turned the church in the western world into another consumer product that we consume week in or once a fortnight or once a month depending on how I feel our lives are so busy that the Christian or spiritual part of our life has been set out to the margins a Christian bit in the spirit where we just include it in just things like activities like Sunday worship or a community group or serving morning tea following

[39 : 57] Jesus is just one of the activities amongst many other activities in my given week and so we talk about a prayer life is like a love life or a work life or a social life as opposed to a life of prayer superficiality is the curse of our age the doctrine of instant gratification is our primary spiritual problem the desperate need for you in your own life for your for settledness for rest rather than restlessness the need for your families the need for your friends for this church for society at a large is not for more and more intelligent entrepreneurial hard working gifted people but deep people in Jesus that's what's needed deep people people who know God and know themselves learning new behaviors rhythms of grace are crucial to the disruption of those old habits and behaviors that we are so committed to that are so habitual in our lives and yet block personal transformation there are three dynamics that work together to bring about personal transformation personal transformation happens best as an inside out process of obedience to God in his word a commitment to obey everything that he says and he's calling me to personal transformation happens best in the context of a loving community of truth and grace personal transformation happens in the context of a reflective life it's a dynamic where they are all working together we need all three operating together personal transformation happens as we intentionally slow down commune with God in the

Bible and prayer and to understand ourselves and our weak and our reactions and our relationships and our habits and to obey his call to take our next step towards transformation and yet with that reflective intentional deliberate life we need the fellowship of community of brothers and sisters in Christ who lovingly speak the truth to us of things that we cannot see but do so in a loving way as sheep on the journey with us transformation does not come from merely learning new information or from developing some extra skills it is the work of the Holy Spirit as we intentionally keep in step with what God is teaching us through his word together now we have a tendency to think that if we have mastered the information then the personal transformation just happens and so if I'm stuck what I need to do is

I need to buy another book I need more information I need new information we need to know God we need to know ourselves and we need time and space to reflect on both of those things and a community of spiritual friends to help us do both so for the solo flyers there is no such thing as personal transformation with our corporate disciplined slow thoughtful life so what this series is going to be with everything is a push against the habits we have formed in life that ultimately declare that we're still pursuing to gain the whole world and just hoping Jesus helps us what we're going to be exploring in the coming weeks are rhythms of grace

God's gift to us his means of gracious transformation in our lives this is not new information if it's new to you it's I want you to go this stuff has been around for centuries and we're trying to work on it in this context 21st century life we're exploring rhythms of worship and devotions and rest and friendship and generosity and service and mission rhythms that get us to look up to God worshipping him rhythms that get us to look at ourselves and rhythms that get us to look out to love all people these rhythms carve out a pathway for God to do the work of transformation these rhythms are uniquely designed by God to help us receive his grace by putting us in the place before God where he can transform us the path itself does not produce the change we need it puts us in the place where the change can occur but we need to get on the path of following

Jesus change all of our lives is right where you are right now right now we're all in different stages it's where you are right now not where you want to be some here have not yet started but you long for real change in your life some are stalled some are crawling, some are walking and some are running the race of faith and the constant call throughout this series is for all of us to take our next step and get covered, I mean doused, completely covered in the gracious, merciful, kind dust of our Lord Jesus Christ as we follow him in 2025.