

Follow 25 Celebration Sunday

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. The year, as we've already heard a bit this morning, you probably remember yourself, 2020 was the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19.

! We had a limit of five and funerals a limit of 10 people.

Only five days after that, the first general public lockdown happened here in New South Wales. It was so rapid, unprecedented times.

All of our habits and behaviours were shifted dramatically. We had to think every time before we moved outside. In fact, from that general public lockdown on the 31st of March 2020, we experienced the constant process of restrictions being eased, only to be tightened again until the 25th of June 2021, when the Delta variant of COVID caused Sydney to go into strict lockdowns once again.

And this hard lockdown stayed in force until the 11th of October 2021, when the New South Wales government allowed us to take off our pyjamas and venture out once again.

[1 : 41] And we started to regather for Sunday services like this in November 2021. That was basically the end of the first year of follow 25.

We regathered like this, but with ongoing restrictions until the end of 2021.

I think it's hard to reflect on follow 25 without factoring in COVID as an issue. Because even from the process of regathering, it was 18 months after that, well into 2022, before an element of a new normality started to settle in amongst us.

COVID-19 cast a very big shadow over, not just the early days of follow 25, but the planning leading up to it.

It was a pandemic that had a profound impact on society. As we know now, things like anxiety and mental health issues went through the roof.

[3 : 01] During lockdowns, issues of alcohol abuse and domestic violence climbed dramatically.

And so the issue, people argue nowadays that the COVID-19 pandemic sped up the issues of anxiety and mental health in our society by 10 years, sped it up so fast.

Of course, what it also did was it had a profound impact on churches. Early thinking of the COVID-19 pandemic was that it estimated that the pandemic sped up the great de-churching of the West by at least 10 years as well, where church attendance rapidly declined.

And the longer we stayed online, the less people were tuning in. So what COVID-19 did was expose for the church in the West, something that some of the greats had been saying for many years, and that there was a shallowness to discipleship, to following Jesus in Western Christianity. For too long, the focus of churches had been, in fact, growing church attendance on programs and buildings, but in fact not on intentionally forming disciples of the Lord Jesus who would multiply themselves as forming other disciples of the Lord Jesus.

And so COVID-19 was the wake-up call that we needed, if we were willing to be woken up, to push follow Jesus in all of life back into the focus for the church like ours.

[4 : 54] And it was the context that produced follow 25, and the key objective to see the majority of us grow in faith in the Lord Jesus.

And so this morning, what we're doing is we're going to go back to see what it is to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, where we started, in fact, in follow 25 and Mark 8.

So get Mark 8 open for us there. And I've got, this is where we're headed today in these points. It's also in the St. Paul's app if you want to follow along in there. The word disciple, not uniquely Christian word, it was in fact common in Greek and both the Greek and Roman empires.

It's a word that literally means a student, learner. In Jewish context, the context of Jesus, is that there was a saying that says that a disciple should become dusty with the dust of their rabbi.

That is, we should follow their rabbi so closely that they would be covered in the dust that the rabbi stirred up by their feet as they walked.

[6 : 05] That is, the idea was that you would follow them in all of life and reflect them in all of life, that as they were dirty, so you became dirty with their dust. And it's in this context that Jesus calls disciples to leave everything to come follow him.

And Mark tells us why. Why would they do that? You see, the crucial question here is the question of who is Jesus.

Jesus says that. Well, you know, who do people say I am? What's the general consensus? Jesus says that. Jesus says that. And the views are many throughout history.

You see, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, is undoubtedly the most popular, recognizable, the most quoted, the most admired, the most controversial figure in all of history and human society. No other person has been more scrutinized and studied. Entire philosophies and religions have been founded on his teaching.

[7 : 23] No more books, sorry, more books have been written about him than any other person in human history. Every day his name is spoken by more people from affectionate admiration to absent-minded curses right through to denouncements.

No teaching has ever been more exploited and used than that of Jesus. Politicians grab one of his quotable quotes in order to prop up their political platform.

It might be to honor him as one of God's prophets or simply as an enlightened man. It might be to reject him as a fraud, to hail him as the king of kings and the saviour of the world.

No person is more misunderstood, marginalized, commercialized than the person of Jesus. He's viewed as a stern taskmaster or as a moral jellyfish, just willing to hand out forgiveness and turn the blind eye to anyone who might pray a simple shallow prayer of confession only to go on the next moment living life devoid of his presence.

In other words, the point is that if you get the person of Jesus wrong, you get Christianity entirely wrong. Entirely wrong.

[8 : 51] Who he is and what he did are the crucial questions because it defines what does it mean to follow him.

And Mark is one of those biographies of Jesus that he wants to make sure that we're not vague about the answers to those questions.

Who he is, what he's done and what does it mean to follow him. In verse 29, Peter answers the big question of the identity of Jesus. He says Jesus is the Messiah.

He's the Christ. He's using a word that literally means you are the anointed one. The anointed one. You're the Messiah. You are the Christ, which means you are the greatest king. You are the king to end all kings. You're the ruler to end all rulers.

[9 : 49] And you're the king. Using the word Messiah means that you will come to defeat evil. And Jesus accepts the title. He does not rebuke Peter at all.

And that has massive implications for all of humanity. Because Peter is using a title that has implications for every single human being.

It's a title which means that Jesus is not calling people here to be curious onlookers. He's not even calling people to be converts. He's calling them to be disciples.

Followers. Followers. Fully committed followers to the Christ. The king to end all kings. The ruler of all rulers.

And the word Christian, the word disciple, the word follower of Jesus, whatever you want to use, are interchangeable words which really describe a relationship with Jesus that is a lifelong, all of life journey where you follow, where you are getting dusty with the dust of the Christ.

[11 : 13] The ruler of all. That's a Christian. But then he, Jesus throws a little bit more light on what it means to be, what it means for him to be the Christ and implications for us who follow it.

So 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 teachers of the law and then 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 says, the son of man must suffer.

So, he accepts the title of the anointed one and now he refers to himself as the son of man. As I said last week, the son of man is a divine figure mentioned hundreds of years earlier in the book of

Daniel chapter 7.

And this son of man comes with authority, all the authority of God to put everything right in a world, in God's world that has gone horribly wrong because of sin.

[12:34] And Jesus refers to himself as that one. But, the idea of the son of man's suffering makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to these Jewish lads following Jesus in this moment.

You see, the Messiah, the son of man was meant to defeat evil and injustice and make everything wrong, everything right that's wrong in the world.

How on earth could the Messiah, the son of man do that by suffering? But Jesus is emphatic.

He is planning to die. It's a planned and a voluntary act. You see, it's one thing for Jesus to say, listen guys, I'm here, I'm going to fight evil.

And, you know, but in the end I will die, I will be defeated. It's another thing entirely for them to say, in actual fact, death is the reason I came to live.

[13:54] And none of this makes sense to Peter at all. At all. You see, from an early age when he could crawl, he was told that the Messiah would come and defeat evil and injustice and he would ascend the throne in Jerusalem and reestablish the nation of Israel, God's people.

people. And Jesus says, I am the Messiah. Peter said it with his own mouth, I am the Messiah. I am the Son of Man but I've come to die not to live and reign.

I've come to lose power not gain it. I've come to serve not to be served. And so Peter in this moment condemns Jesus in the strongest possible terms.

The strongest possible terms. And Jesus rebukes him. You see, Jesus is emphatic.

I must suffer. And the word must there controls the entire sentence. I must suffer.

[15:20] I must be rejected. I must be killed. And I must be resurrected. And all of those musts have to happen for humanity to be saved and for the world to be renewed.

For justice to be served, Jesus must suffer. He must suffer. You see, when someone wrongs us in any category of life, what happens in that moment is a debt is established.

For instance, if you grab my phone and you break my phone or you steal my phone, a debt has been established. Imagine you break it, you tread on it, although apparently it's not meant to break. So we'll see. Hopefully not. There are really only two options in that moment. Either you pay to repair or to replace my phone or I say to you, don't worry about it, I forgive you.

They're the only two options. in the first case, you pay the debt. You either get my phone repaired or you replace it, you've got to open up your wallet or your key card and you've got to pay for it.

[16:52] In other words, and in the second case, I pay for the debt. That is, the value of that phone doesn't just disappear into the ether somewhere.

The value of the phone is still there and someone has to pay for it. And if I choose to forgive you that debt, then I have to pay the debt.

I either pay the repairs on the phone or I pay for a new phone or I go back to paper and pen and landline or pigeons or whatever.

In other words, I absorb the debt in some way and I have to pay for it if I forgive you. And that happens on every level in society.

If someone robs us of an opportunity of happiness or reputation or in some, a debt is accrued at that point.

[17:59] A relational debt is accrued. And there's only two choices. You can make the other person pay by destroying their opportunities and ruining their reputation.

That is, you can hope that they suffer or you can ensure that they do. And in that moment, as I said last week, evil wins.

it's fighting fire with fire. And when you fight fire with fire, one debt creates another debt which creates another debt which creates another debt and it goes on and evil wins.

And the only alternative in that moment instead of fighting fire with fire is to forgive. forgive. But forgiveness is so hard.

It's in fact the harder way. It's absolute agony because forgiveness means I choose to absorb the debt that you have against me.

[19:14] It means not trying to get my reputation back by tearing down your reputation even subtly sharing prayer points. Lord we want to pray for this person who's wrong to me.

Did I mention them by name by the way so that you all know? True forgiveness always requires suffering. Debt never just vanishes.

And that's why Jesus says here I must suffer. The only way that the son of man can defeat evil and maintain justice.

The only way that God can forgive us is if he was to absorb the debt himself and pay for it himself.

The alternative is he obliterates humanity.

It's either humanity pays the debt for its sin of rejecting God their creator by suffering under the justice of God. You reject the author of life and so you die eternal life.

[20 : 31] Or God chooses to forgive sin in which means he pays for it. Jesus must suffer. He must go to the cross and he must die.

And so we have this remarkable moment here. Jesus is the Christ. He is the king to end all kings. He is the ruler and deserves our allegiance.

He deserves us to follow him. He has the authority to command it. But he's the king that we could never possibly imagine.

He's the king who must die because he chooses to forgive. You see, as the Christ with all authority, Jesus can demand us to follow him, but it's the Christ who chooses to suffer for us out of love in order to forgive us, that compels us to follow him.

But he doesn't just stop there because as he walks this journey and our role as followers of him is to get dust, dust, let's just keep reading verse 34, for then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

[22 : 09] Whoever wants to save their life will 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? Now what does it mean to lose our life for the gospel in order to save it?

The word translated life there in verse 35 is a word that literally stems from the original word ego. It means your identity, it means your personality, it means your sense of selfhood.

Ah. It means the things that make you distinctively you, what you have built your life on. In other words, what Jesus is saying here in a roundabout kind of way is he's saying don't build your identity on gaining the whole world for yourself.

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.

[23 : 30] Now every culture, no matter what culture we come from, says that if you gain certain things in life, if you acquire them or you achieve them, then you will have a strong sense of identity of who you are and you'll know at that moment that you are valuable, that you are worthy and then you'll have rest.

Traditional cultures would say that you have no sense of self unless you gain the respectability and legacy of family and children. Individualistic cultures say things like you're nobody unless you have a fulfilling career that brings you reputation, money, status, that kind of stuff.

Either way, it doesn't matter what culture you come from, all cultures of this world basically say the same thing. Who you are as a person, your identity, your sense of who you are is based on your performance.

In one way or another, it's based on your performance. It's based on what you've achieved. If you perform well enough in conforming to your culture, then you will find the love and the approval and the acceptance that you so desperately need.

And what Jesus says here is if you gain the entire world, you do it better than anyone else, it won't be enough because you will lose.

[25 : 11] the more you try to gain, the more you will lose your sense of self. It's not without a certain sense of irony that one of the things that COVID-19 brought out for us, particularly in lockdowns in the Western world, a growing sense of mental health, an actual pandemic of mental health.

Why? One of the core foundational values of Western civilisation is personal freedom.

And a whole generation have been grown up through schools. You can be whoever you want, you can do whatever you want. That is until the government says I can't leave home. My core value of my identity has been rocked.

by not being able to even leave my home. You can gain the whole world, it won't be enough.

If we build our identity on a relationship or a career or whatever it might be, what happens when something goes wrong with that thing?

[26 : 39] Our sense of self is rocked. I don't just lose a job, I lose part of myself. And so what Jesus says here is I'm not come to convince you to shift from one performance-based identity to another performance-based identity.

He wants us to lose our old self, the old identity, and base our sense of approval and worth, our value, on the identity that only He can give us.

Notice it there in verse 35. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and here's the alternative. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

In other words, whoever surrenders their life to me, whoever hands over themselves to me, and the gospel will save it. When our life is lost in the gospel, we save it.

And the gospel, if you're new here, or even if you're not, let me remind you again, it is the foundation of what we believe here at St. Paul's. It is the heart of Christianity and the Christian discipleship.

[27 : 54] You don't ever move beyond the gospel. The gospel is not something we do, it is something God has done for us in Jesus. It is God's grace to us from beginning to end.

We believe and receive and we live as followers of Jesus in the light of the gospel. And the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins and he rose again eternally triumphant over all of his enemies, evil, sin, death, in such a way that there is now no condemnation, not even a skerrick of condemnation for anyone who puts their trust in Jesus but only the hope of everlasting joy in him.

1 Thessalonians 5 is pure gospel for God did not appoint us to suffer but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with him.

You see once we see the Son of God loving us like that we begin to get a strength and assurance and identity that actually sets us free and Peter in this moment is furious he's furious because his agenda for Jesus was an agenda that led from strength to strength to strength and while he acknowledged that Jesus was the king he was hoping that he would at least be the prime minister and bask in the glory of Jesus' victory as he took the throne in Jerusalem and so Peter's agenda did not involve suffering as it is the agenda for so many Christians in the western world it does not involve suffering if Jesus is the king to end all kings what we are told here is we do not negotiate with him it's essential that we see Jesus the king on the cross if we simply see him as a king on a throne we'll obey him because we have to obey him and there's a definition of religion but he is the ultimate king who went to the cross for us and therefore we can submit to him out of love and trust and so following

Jesus means dying to self determination it means dying to control my life it means dying to using Jesus for my own agenda and simply saying with our whole being whatever you call me to do I will do and whatever you send I will accept it's a life of submission and what is the goal of that you see if you get Jesus wrong we get follow him wrong and we also get what his plan for us is wrong verse 38 is the goal of Jesus entire mission if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous sinful generation the son of man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his father's glory with the holy angels in other words what he's saying here is

[31 : 47] Jesus mission is not just simply to save sinners but it's in fact to save sinners for God's glory until the very end when God is glorified Jesus came into this world to reveal the glorious God to a world that is intoxicated with its own glory and its own passions to gain the entire world growth as a disciple of Jesus is a simultaneous process of getting a bigger and bigger vision and grasping more and more faith the Lord Jesus Christ as king over my life and a growth downwards as I divest myself of all sense of who

I am and my worthiness I grow downwards as I see my frailty and my sin! And so I grow upwards in and downwards in humility and they happen together concurrently and Jesus Christ calls him to follow him so that we might become like him for God's glory 1 John 3 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 see him as he is all who have that hope in the future my words in him purify themselves just as he is in other words the goal of being saved by Jesus the goal of following Jesus is personal transformation into the likeness of

Jesus to become as he is like Jesus in his patient endurance like Jesus in his priority like Jesus in his mission to the world to be a Christian is to walk the path of transformation into the image of Jesus Christianity is not just about sin management I pray to praise forgive my sins and now Jesus job is to support me and my agenda for life that's what Peter got wrong and we cannot grow in personal transformation unless we are consistently looking at and to the one we are to become like that's been the essence of follow 25 in fact the key objective there was 75% growing much in faith why that key objective because unless we are specifically growing in faith all the other things that we would do associated with being a disciple of

Jesus generosity doesn't happen evangelism doesn't happen although growing greater confidence the rest doesn't happen and we've heard again about the last five years and remind again today that research has indicated that there's only really one I mean there's multiple things that contribute to growth in faith but there's one key one and that is reading God's word more than four times a week in other words constantly gazing on the glory of Christ and God and his gospel four more times a week and so when I put down there 65% us growing in faith that was a target according to people who were helping us at this point was a very ambitious target especially so because in 2021 the figure for us here at

St. Paul's was 17% and so did we hit 65% no research our own research this year we hit 48% is that a failure 10 years ago I would have said yes right now I'd say no in fact along with that 48% and I might add that in our own church culture here in Sydney the average is around the 24% but along with that 48% we are also seeing in the last 12 months 94% of us are saying that they're growing in faith what's the bedrock 78% of us are saying that they're doing a personal devotional life more than a few times a week there it is right there gazing on the glory of the gospel and so for me personally [38:02] I started follow 25 with a commitment to read the Old Testament five times and the New Testament and Psalms ten times over the course of the five years I had never had to do that before and I wasn't sure how I was going to do it but the disruption of my routines during COVID 19 restrictions provided the opportunity that I needed for new habits to be formed the lockdowns were a blessing on one level for me as it was for most introverts by the way and those habits that were formed in those days still continue to this day and so I'm hoping just in the next couple of weeks to be able to say based on I'm up to date and

I see no reason why I would not finish that commitment I am so thankful for the challenging times in the early stage of Follow 25 and the fruit that it bore I can tell you over the last five years and the commitment to read God's word in that way my grasp of the landscape of God's word and God's character has grown exponentially where I can read what might be regarded as obscure passages in the Old Testament and go there's the gospel right there there's God's character on display right there and as I've seen more and more of God over the last five years I've also seen more and more of myself I started to see in the last five years and particularly around the early days of COVID-19 which started a bunch of the for me desires and passions that were deep down inside of me that were more akin to Peter Jesus I want to make your name great providing you make my name great with you as well glorify yourself if it means glorifying me with you with that unprecedented season in church life with COVID-19 all the markers of success of a church pastor went in rapid decline rapid decline so many pastors left churches during the pandemic and soon afterwards in the regathering phase because it was just too hard to rebuild churches and so with COVID-19 came to the surface with me not just sin but the anxiety that surfaced with those sins I had never ever considered myself to be an anxious person before as I saw God more and more in his word through that season he has helped me see my sin and he's also helped me to become more confident in him and gradually bit by bit less anxious and controlling in the midst of a chaos and more dependent upon him to become the language of some non-anxious presence to work more on that and so I'm thankful for what God has done in me over the past five years and what follow 25 has meant for us despite us not achieving all that I thought it might achieve but I am looking forward with hope to what God might do together