

This morning we are going to look at our Gospel reading from Mark, where Jesus challenges his disciples to understand the true meaning of following him. However just to help, we need to set some context to our reading. At the beginning of this chapter, chapter 8, we see 4000 people fed with 7 loaves of bread and a few fish. Jesus then goes on to Bethsaida and heals a blind man. But constantly in these events, the Pharisees are looking for more examples and signs as proof of who he might be. Jesus isn't into doing street side tricks to amuse their curiosity. Jesus, as Mark says, is full of compassion. He is interested in the crowd and he is interested in the individual. But Jesus wants to understand where their hearts are truly at, which is where this morning's reading comes in. Jesus wanted to know how people perceived Him, so he asks the question, "Who do people say that I am?"

And folks this morning, everything in our lives depends upon the answer to that question. Because we have to ask ourselves, what does our heart say about Jesus? Because for many of us, being brought up in the church all our lives, we can rhyme off some answer which says that Jesus is the son of God who came to save humanity. But that doesn't actually answer my question. Is Jesus something to you? Is he someone that you cling on to before anything else. Or is Jesus simply a figure head for the church. The reason I'm emphasizing this, is because the next set of points which Jesus brings out about life after his death, will totally determine our future.

He says this, "If any wants to become my followers', then they must do three things :

1. They must deny themselves
2. they must take up their cross
3. They must follow Jesus

So Jesus says these three things.

1. Firstly to deny Oneself

Now here when it talks about denying oneself, it's not like trying to keep ourselves away from a craving, or staying off chocolate for Lent. Jesus here is talking about the process of becoming His true disciple. If anyone wants to be my disciple then he has to be different from what he is now. He has got to set aside anything of his own interests for the sake of Jesus.

The Greek word for Deny is a strong word – it's *aparnesatho*. It is the same word that Peter used when denying Jesus in the courtyard - it literally means to renounce something. It means that you have NO CONNECTION with something - that you refuse to recognise it. So in this context Jesus is saying that if you follow him you have got to walk completely away from any self-sufficiency, anything that the world may look as valuable. The Message Bible puts these words of Mark like this, "anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat. I AM"

Now that's a difficult thing to take on board, isn't it. People don't like being told what to do. That's why so many, including people who regularly attend churches, find the Gospel offensive. But Jesus is saying here, you've got to give away your own interests, and let me be number 1.

And so ask yourself this question, "Are we willing to make the pursuit of God more important than the pursuit of what we want? Who this morning is in the driver's seat – is it you or is definitely God?"

2. Take Up his Cross

So secondly, what does take up the cross mean? There is some debate around what exactly this means. You've probably heard people who are going through challenges or hardships in life will say, "That's my cross", and therefore taking up the cross can be considered meaning people living through life with their struggles – 'she's carrying a heavy cross'. But again back to the Greek, the actual words here are translated as "let him pick up the cross". So the suggestion is actually about volunteering or a willingness to take pain for the sake of our faith, an active willingness to step out for God maybe where we know we face opposition.

Mark was writing this letter initially to the Romans, who clearly knew what it meant to take up a cross. Death on a cross was a form of execution for dangerous criminals, and the prisoner carrying his own cross signified his submission to Rome's power. So Jesus uses the image of carrying the cross to illustrate the ultimate submission required by his followers. He's not against enjoying life, nor was he saying that we should seek pain needlessly. He was however talking about the heroic effort needed to follow him moment by moment, day by day, to do his will even when the work is difficult and the future looks bleak.

I was playing at an event a number of years ago in the Waterfront Hall for Open Doors. The European Director told the story of the 21 Egyptian Christians who were held captive in February by ISIS in Libya. The Director of Open Doors decided that he wanted to watch the video of their execution, only so that he could understand how dreadful the crimes against humanity are. As he watched the video of the 21 men being marched along the beach to face their death, he recalled to us that you could hear from the audio recording all the men calling out "Jesu", "Jesu", before they were killed. These men were given the option to turn from away from Christ and follow the Koran, but instead they chose to take up their cross, even though it would mean death.

Jesus makes it clear to us that we are to take up the cross, whatever our context. So are we actively standing for our faith? Do we read things and respond, or do we shy away because we know that it could bring unpopularity?

And so what does Jesus say if we don't take up our cross. Well the Gospels make it very clear. In Matthew 10:38 Jesus says, "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." In Luke 14:27 Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

3. Follow me

And so finally Jesus asks us to follow him. Again the actual translation in the greek is a continuous verb. It isn't that you once gave your life to Christ, and that this was a milestone at a point. Folks, that is not the definition of a Christian. No, Jesus says that we are to continually follow him. Now in order to continue to follow someone, then you need to be close to them. You can't follow someone if you can't see them. It requires an active effort and pursuit on our part. And so Jesus is saying that daily you need to see him. But folks the amazing thing about Jesus is that when we stumble which inevitably happens to all us, Jesus waits for us and he helps us along our journey. So the question today is this – can you see Jesus each day? have you got things in place in your life to ensure you are walking closely with him? Do you read your bible daily? Do you talk to him daily? Do you hear him talking to you? Are you actively looking to grow in your relationship with Jesus?

Folks, Jesus never promised that this Christian life would be plain sailing. When we actively put Jesus before our own needs, when we are willing to face persecution or opposition for what we believe, and when we choose to daily walk close with him, then He says we will lose the life that this secular society thinks as important, however we will gain a new life that will last far long after this world is gone. The one thing I know is that you will not waste your life by following Jesus.

I wonder this morning are you asking the questions that the Pharisees and some of Jesus' disciples were asking. Who is he? Do you personally know the answer? as a result of that answer we must deny ourself, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.