

MARK 8:27-38
ST JOHN'S, 25.2.18, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

I once knew an inspirational lady called Joy. Joy spent 33 years working as a missionary for YWAM, and she summed up all she'd learned during that time in these words: "Believe that the Lord speaks and speaks personally. When Jesus called his disciples he just said 'follow me.' Nothing else. Just do this."¹

There are lots of ways in which we can 'follow' another person, or people. Children play 'follow-my-leader', where the rules are: Do whatever the leader does; go wherever the leader goes. Lots of us support, or 'follow' a football team, or a particular film star, musician, or pop group; or when we have a personal hero or heroine: if we admire someone enough, we try to emulate that person, in the way we dress, or the way we behave.

All these ideas can help us to understand what Jesus says here to the crowd and to his disciples: *If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me* (v 34). The posh word for following Jesus is 'discipleship'. We hear the word 'disciples' often as we read the gospels; what it means is 'followers' and 'learners'.

This passage teaches us a huge amount about discipleship. It includes Peter's declaration, *You are the Messiah* (v 29), which speaks of the beginning of discipleship – how we become disciples of Jesus; it

speaks about the cost of discipleship; and it speaks about the rewards of discipleship.

So firstly, let's look at what we can learn here about:

THE BEGINNING OF DISCIPLESHIP

In one sense, Peter and his companions had begun their discipleship some time before this, when they first followed Jesus. From that moment on, they'd followed Jesus in a physical sense, and presumably in the sense of being his supporters. They'd begun to learn from him. We can see from this passage that they still had a great deal to learn about following Jesus. But at this particular moment they learn exactly who it is they're following. They may well have already guessed who Jesus is. But it's only as Peter blurts out, *You are the Messiah*, that they fully realise exactly whom they're following.

It's hard for us to realise quite how earth-shattering this was for Jesus' followers. The word 'Messiah' (in Hebrew), or 'Christ' (in Greek), means 'the Anointed One'. A messiah was someone who'd been consecrated by God for a particular task. In the OT, kings and priests were anointed in this way. In Jesus' time, people used the word 'Messiah' to mean the person God was going to send to set his people free from their oppressors. There were different groups who expected different things from Messiah. But to say that Messiah had come was to say 'here at last is the One we've been waiting for'.

In one sense, as I've said, Peter was a disciple well before he realised that Jesus was the Messiah. But it was only when he made this declaration, *You are the Messiah*, when he identified Jesus as the Anointed One of God, that Peter became a Christian. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus commends Peter in these words: *Good for you, Simon son of John! For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven!* (Matthew 16:17). It's still true today that no-one can come to know Jesus' true identity unless the Holy Spirit reveals it to them. And it's in the moment that we recognise and accept Jesus as Messiah, as Son of God, as Saviour and as Lord; in the moment that we acknowledge his right to our total commitment, to our complete obedience throughout our lives; in that moment that we become true disciples, true Christians. The beginning of discipleship is both a recognition, and most significantly, a decision. We recognise Jesus as the Anointed One of God, as the Son of the living God, as the one and only person who can save us from our sin, as the Lord to whom we owe total allegiance. And we decide to follow him, to do whatever he does, to go wherever he goes, to support him, and to emulate him.

But what about

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Before we think about the cost of discipleship, we need to consider the cost of Messiahship. As soon as Peter and the others realise that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins to tell them that: *The Son of Man*

must suffer much and be rejected . . . He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life (v 31). This is the exact opposite of what the Jews expected of Messiah, and we can see from Peter's response that it was a nasty shock for Jesus' disciples as well. Yes, Jesus is Messiah. But he hasn't come as a conquering hero; his mission is not to set his people free from their Roman oppressors by raising an army. Instead, he's come as a suffering servant; his mission is to set people free from their sins by dying as a martyr. Even worse, it's not the Romans, the enemy, who are going to reject him and put him to death. No, God's own people are going to reject God's Messiah and have him killed!

This is too much for the disciples. Typically, once again, it's Peter who speaks their minds, as he takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. As one commentator points out, Peter's protest is entirely natural – but that's just the trouble.² From a human point of view, it's sheer nonsense to allow God's Anointed One to be rejected and killed. Peter hasn't yet learned to see things from God's point of view. He might be the first true Christian, but Jesus rebukes him here in far sterner terms than he ever uses for the Pharisees: *Get away from me Satan. Your thoughts don't come from God but from man!* (v 33)

So Jesus begins to teach the disciples about the cost of Messiahship. He makes it clear that he will brook no protest from his followers. And he goes on to spell out the cost of discipleship. Some inkling of that cost is implicit in what Jesus has said about his own fate. Remember,

a follower goes wherever the leader goes, and does whatever the leader does. So, if Jesus is headed for suffering, rejection and death, the chances are his followers are also headed in that direction. But Jesus isn't leaving the cost of discipleship as implicit. He spells it out, very starkly: *If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross and follow me* (v 34).

The image of carrying a cross has lost its impact for us. We have two thousand years of Christian history behind us. For us, the cross has rightly become a symbol of salvation. And this picture of carrying our cross has been diluted to mean carrying a burden through life. That wasn't true for the disciples. Remember, they'd only just heard for the first time what Jesus' fate was going to be. They didn't yet know that Jesus would die on a cross. In their world, people carrying crosses were people going to execution. That is the cost of discipleship! To be a disciple, a follower, of Jesus, means surrendering the whole of our lives. It's not just about coming to church on a Sunday morning; it's not just about giving some of our 'spare' time to church activities; it's not even just about giving our life in a physical sense, and becoming martyrs – although some of us may find that that's our calling. To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, means just what Jesus says here: forgetting self – all our own material desires, our petty (and no-so-petty!) quarrels, our ambition, our pride, our needs, everything that's about ME – all that we must forget. To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, means carrying our cross – joining Jesus on the road to execution, with all the shame that brings with it, all the jeers, all the

mocking, and all the pain. To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, means exactly that, to follow Jesus wherever he goes. The cost of discipleship is very high indeed.

But, great though the cost may be,

THE REWARDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

are even greater! Jesus spells out the paradox: *For whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it* (v 35). Confused? That's because Jesus uses the same word for both physical life and spiritual life. What Jesus is saying is that those who cling to physical life may risk forfeiting spiritual life. On the other hand, those who lose their physical life because they're following Jesus will find that they still have spiritual life. Another way of looking at it is this: if we clutch our life wholly to ourselves, protecting it against other people, asserting our rights, our needs, our privileges – we lose our life because it isn't life any longer. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that life isn't ours by right, that everything we have, including life itself, is a privilege, a gift of God, and therefore life is for loving as Jesus loves, and for giving as Jesus gives, then we wholly possess life. The cost of discipleship is very great, but the reward of discipleship far outshadows the cost. As Jesus says elsewhere, *I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness* (John 10:10). This kind of life is total freedom – the freedom of loving God and being able to receive his love. It's also known as eternal or everlasting life. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells

two short stories of people who sell everything they have in order to buy something of great value (Matthew 13:44-46). Brothers and sisters, the message is: it's worth it! *You're worth it!*

CONCLUSION

So Jesus challenges us this morning. Have we forgotten ourselves, are we carrying our cross and following Jesus on the road towards suffering, rejection and death? If not, are we ready to begin that journey this morning? Are we prepared to pay the cost of discipleship, to surrender our whole life to him, to carry our cross, and to follow him wherever he goes? Or would we rather that Jesus is ashamed of us *when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels?* (v 38)

And Jesus encourages us this morning. The rewards far outweigh the cost. The freedom to love god, the creator of the universe, and to be able to receive his personal love for us is precious beyond measure. And as Jesus says a bit later in Mark's gospel, *anyone who leaves home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and for the gospel . . . Will receive (a hundred times more) in this present age . . . And persecutions as well; and in the age to come he will receive eternal life* (Mark 10:29-30). Following Jesus is the only way to have life in all its fulness, the life we were created to receive. It's more than worth the cost.

¹ quoted by Anne Sloan in YWAM's dedication to Joy Barker, <http://www.ywamengland.org/joy-barker/>

² R T France, The People's Bible Commentary: Mark, (Oxford, The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1996), p 112