



## St Mark's Lenten Study 2009

### Following Jesus – a way forward

He called the people and his disciples to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'<sup>1</sup>

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem; Jesus was walking on ahead of them; they were in a daze, and those who followed were apprehensive.<sup>2</sup>

I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete.<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus saw the crowd all about him he gave orders to leave for the other side. One of the scribes then came up and said to him, 'Master, I will follow you wherever you go.'<sup>4</sup>

### The Way of Self-Denial

If anyone has the will and the desire to join me on my journey then he or she will need to face me, face themselves, face others, and forget the false-self in order to find their true-self. To do this, the false self must come with me to the cross and die there, in order for the true-self to be revealed through the resurrection to new life.

I am making a distinction between self-denial and self-hatred. The self-denial I believe Jesus is here referring to is the denial of all that is false about who and what we were created to be. In the summary of the law Jesus quotes two commandments as being equally important, to love God with all of our being and to love others as ourselves<sup>5</sup>. We accept that we are to love God with our whole being even as we also accept that we are prone to fall short in the process – for which we often beat ourselves up. This sense of a lack of ability or faithfulness to fulfill the great commandment has through the centuries fuelled a great deal of self-hatred in humankind which then makes the second commandment almost impossible to fulfill. Indeed, too often in the church the starting point for hearing about the love of God and his great desire to be in relationship with us is presented as a negative rather than a positive – all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God<sup>6</sup>. True, Paul does say this in Romans but he also says that Jesus does not come to condemn but to bring us freedom from all that would hold us in bondage to sin and death.<sup>7</sup>

One of the false idols of the faith that we would do well to forget is that of the vengeful God who is hovering above us ready to squish us (and everyone else) like a bug as soon as we make a wrong move. Jesus himself does and says a lot to dispel this image. It is true that there are passages that refer to judgment in the gospels but almost without exception they are with reference to those who regard themselves as being religious rather than those who are amongst the marginalized and outsiders. Jesus consistently welcomes the waifs and strays and the ordinary folks of society into his company without condemnation (including the most undesirable). Why else would he be accused of being a glutton and a drunkard if it were not for the fact that he was comfortable in such company?<sup>8</sup> He also consistently challenges the self-righteous and those who imagine themselves to have it all sown up.

Jesus simply asks us what it is that we desire – do we have the will to join him on his journey? Do we have the desire to join him on his adventure of faith? If we do then there will be no room for hiding in the shadows. We will be summonsed to stand up straight in the knowledge that we are loved and accepted just as we are. We do not measure ourselves against what we imagine others may think of us or require of us. We measure ourselves by the simple fact that Jesus has come to restore us to our true selves. He does not set obstacles in our way, no hoops for us to jump through. He will not burden us with overly religious requirements – rather he will lift that burden from us and replace

it with a lighter burden. The yolk of self-acceptance in place of the crippling yolk of self-hatred. He alone is the stranger to self-hatred, knowing himself to be the beloved one in whom God is well pleased. We are called to be like him and as such we would do well to listen for that word of affirmation spoken from the heavens to each one of us by our God. We are made in the image of God, God's works of art<sup>9</sup>, created to be creators free of self-condemnation and filled with the confidence that only acceptance and unconditional love can bring us.

So, to follow Jesus on the way is to deny our false selves and our false gods and set off on the journey of amazement that is the journey of faith in Christ – the stranger to self-hatred.

## The Way of Wonder

Jesus leads us on the way of wonder as we follow in amazement, bewilderment and awe

Paul tells us that we must *work out our salvation in fear and trembling*<sup>10</sup> and here in this verse from Marks gospel we see something of that expressed about those who were following Jesus on the road. There can be no doubt that the disciples were in a constant state of bewilderment as they witnessed the fiery teaching of Jesus and the demonstrations of the Kingdom of God. Many would be the time that they would stand in awe of this man. One interpretation of what Paul is saying could be as follows;

Be creative in your faith, recognizing that wholeness will come with awe and wonder!

The journey of faith is a dynamic and creative journey. One of the most common words used for the life lived in the *power* of the spirit is *dunamis* which is where we get the word *dynamite*. The Christian life is to be a dynamic life – but by this I do not necessarily mean *demonstrative*. There is nothing wrong with being demonstrative but this is not to be mistaken for *dunamis* – the power derived from the knowledge that God dwells in us deeply by his Spirit. Indeed, often the greatest expression of power, or dynamism, is the quiet confidence to simply do the next thing. Faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, peace, patience, kindness, love, and deep joy are all described as the fruit of the Spirit<sup>11</sup>. The dynamic life of faith is a fruitful life lived out of a quiet confidence that God is love, unconditional love, and we are loved – even before we loved God, God loves us<sup>12</sup>.

We need to allow this to bewilder us! We need to stand and be amazed at the great love and acceptance of God for all of humanity and for us as individuals. Following Jesus will require that we cultivate an appreciation for spending time in the solitude of the wilderness of our own hearts in order to experience the still presence of God deep within us<sup>13</sup>. Stillness and spending time in the presence of God are essential for the cultivation of awe and wonder – be still and know that I am God<sup>14</sup>.

## The Way of Joy

Everything I tell you, I tell you so that you may experience a life lived with overflowing joy – the very same joy that fuels my own life of faith in the Father.

The suggestion that we are to have the very same joy fuelling our faith that fuelled the faith of Jesus is yet another occasion for standing back in amazement. This is what Jesus is saying – everything he has come to show us has one purpose – to complete our joy. The word translated *complete* is *pleroo* which literally translated would be *filled to overflowing, lacking nothing*. Jesus gives an illustration of this when he speaks about how generous we should be, *Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap; because the standard you use will be the standard used for you*<sup>15</sup>. As we have received so we are to give – freely and fully, overflowing with gratitude and joy!<sup>16</sup>

Joy here is not about happiness – happiness is a fickle emotion and there are many things that can rob us of it. Joy is the deep experience of gratitude and wonder when we realize that we are loved and accepted for who we are and nothing else. Joy is the expression of a life fulfilled, as Rollo May says in his book *The Courage To Create*,

Joy, rather than happiness, is the goal of life, for joy is the emotion which accompanies our fulfilling our natures as human beings. It is based on the experience of one's identity as a being of worth and dignity<sup>17</sup>.

All the while we pursue happiness as human beings we will inevitably find only a fleeting fulfillment because often happiness is defined for us by the society in which we live. A new car, a plasma TV, the perfect partner, a successful

career, children who are high achievers – the list goes on and the subtlety of these things is that they are imposed upon us from outside by the expectations of others and subtle marketing. We imagine that by having these things we will be acceptable to our friends and neighbors and regarded as ‘successful’. And let us not imagine that we are free of such things in the church – in the church our pursuit of happiness might lead us to seeking to find out what our ministry is, what role we may have, how beautiful the flowers and the brasses are, how much money we have been able to raise, how well we pray or read the bible in public worship, or how certain we are of our doctrinal soundness – all of these things in themselves are not wrong – unless they are where we hope to find acceptance in the eyes of others (or even ourselves because we are almost always our fiercest critics). The sad truth is that it is the pursuit of happiness through these things that inevitably results in our becoming miserable and lacking in true joy. I have a friend who would describe churchgoers as those who have had the baptism of lemon juice.

To follow Jesus on his journey is to follow in a procession of unbridled joy simply because we are restored to our true selves – made in the image and likeness of God. A quiet, confident joy borne out of our finding that we are found by God and brought home to share in his kingdom right here, right now.

## The Way of Wherever

Teacher, I will join you on your journey wherever it may take me

And so, finally as we reach the end of this series, the way forward as we follow Jesus is the way of wherever. Like the Scribe in this passage from Matthew we too must approach Jesus and commit ourselves to following wherever – and *wherever* can lead us in many different directions. Some of which may be challenging and even difficult, some of which will be exhilarating and adventurous, all of which will be surprising and none of them boring or predictable. Wherever we follow Jesus we will always be challenged to forget what we thought we knew. We will be engaged in a game of hide and seek as we know ourselves to be found by God even as we find Jesus in unexpected places. We will need to be forgiving of one another just as we are forgiven for our faults and mistakes along the way. We will also need to forgive those things done to us and to others in the name of Jesus but not in the love of Jesus. As we follow Jesus wherever it takes us it will always require that we face Jesus and in so doing face ourselves so that we can face others without fear of rejection or rebuke. The *wherever* will take us into the darkness we so often flee from. But we need not flee from it for God is in the darkness of our doubts and fears as well as the light of our faith and fullness. There is no place where God is not.

To follow Jesus is to risk ourselves to a journey of faith and not certainty, of hope in what we do not see and not evidence of what is seen, of truth (reality) and not smugness (falsity). To follow Jesus is to accept that faith is a journey and not a destination, to know that we have not arrived but that we are on the Way. To follow Jesus is only the beginning . . . . the beginning of an adventure in faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8.34

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10.32

<sup>3</sup> John 15.11

<sup>4</sup> Matt 8.18,19

<sup>5</sup> Matt 22.38

<sup>6</sup> Romans 3.23

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8.1,2 my paraphrase based on what Jesus says in the gospels about not coming to condemn or judge but to give life

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 11.19

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 2.10

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 2.12

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 5.22

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 4.19

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 6.19; Romans 8.26 and many other passages that state clearly that the Spirit of God dwells in us.

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 46.10

<sup>15</sup> Luke 6.38

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 10.8

<sup>17</sup> *The Courage To Create*, Rollo May. May was an American existential psychologist and a close friend of the theologian Paul Tillich, this book was so titled to honor Tillich's ground breaking book *The Courage to Be*