

**OT reading – Exodus 15v27-16v8** [Points to make – They had been in a wonderful Oasis where no-one complained, they moved then into a desert region (a tougher part of the journey) and they said they wished they had died in Egypt where life was easier for them, even as slaves. They were looking back When we complain to each other about our lot and look back to our past, our complaint is really directed as Jesus, no matter how much we dress it up].

**NT reading - Luke 9v57-62 – The Would be followers of Jesus**

**Sermon Synopsis.** *There is a cost to following Jesus but we should be happy to pay the cost as our response to what he has done for us through his Grace. We should focus ahead of us at the work Jesus has for us to do, and not look back at the things that will distract us.*

## **Jesus & the would-be followers [A talk on Mission & the Cost of Discipleship]**

What is Mission? Do I have to do it? And if so, what will it cost me? Reasonable questions to ask? I hope to answer that today with some help particularly on the last part of the question, by looking at a passage from Luke's gospel where Jesus talks to three would-be followers.

First though I want you to imagine that I am your boss. I have two jobs to give out, and you get first pick. One of them will be 'a walk in the park' for you, the other will be 'a real mission'. Without knowing anymore which will you ask for?

Who wants the job that is a 'walk in the park' (quaint English phrase); you probably have the impression that it is going to be familiar, easy, and pleasant job, without anything novel and not taking too long. Who would ask me for the real mission of a job? You might expect that this will challenging job with some unexpected barriers to overcome, took longer than expected, one that you may or may not have enjoyed, but one that will stretch you). Looking back on my career I have had plenty jobs of both type but it's the missions that I remember, and think fondly of. Tough at the time, but great to achieve.

### **Christians do Mission by following Jesus**

Looking at Christian mission now, I want to start with some bold statements, that set a foundation for a look at both Mission itself and the cost to us..

1. Being a Christian is all about following Jesus.
2. Following Jesus – itself **IS** Mission – like a challenging journey, but one that often has plenty of rest points & great views.
3. Mission **IS** following Jesus (When we do the Mission that we are supposed to do, that resonates with the heart of Jesus, then we **ARE** following Jesus.

So in my eyes, Christianity, following Jesus and doing Mission are the same things! So if asked should I be doing Mission work, I would say Yes, focus on Jesus and follow him by doing what you feel would be please him. If you have no specific tasks or challenges that you are called to do by Him, then start by loving the people in front of you each day, and demonstrate the love of Jesus to them, that's Mission.

### **Will it cost me to follow Jesus?**

You could come back at me and say but Gods love and forgiveness is free, why do I have to do mission work? That would mean there is a cost to following Jesus, doing Mission? Does there have to be a cost? In theory the answer **could** be No! But in practice it is always Yes. That is because the Grace of God, i.e. forgiveness through Jesus Christ is always freely given. Its free but is not cheap. Jesus loved you so much that he stretched out his arms and his wrists got nailed to the cross. That didn't cost you a penny, but it cost God a lot. In this sense you enter a relationship, but a disproportionate one, in that whilst there is giving on both sides, it is heavily weighted on one side, with Jesus.

Where else do we have heavily disproportionate relationships? Bringing up children? Latest figures say it costs £150,000 to raise a child to 18. That's before you pay for university fees and expenses if you can afford to. There is some giving from the child, loving and helping you at times, but most of it is one way. If they take the last food from the fridge, its not long before more is in there. Clothes get muddy, hey presto they magically turn up clean again. To your child, everything must seem free, but it is certainly not cheap to you. My cheque book seems to be out every day for some club fee or school expense.

When it comes to the Grace of God, it is totally free, we can not earn it, or pass it on, we can just receive the forgiveness and new life from Jesus. But how do we respond to this free Grace, this great gift from God. Some people believe that you can live like anyone else in the World and carry on doing as many things wrong as you like, because you will keep on getting forgiven. Its like a big barrel of forgiveness that you can keep filling a pint mug from whenever you have done wrong. To some extent that is true, God will not stop forgiving us, and will not stop loving us – he can't, but as we keep doing wrong, there is still a cost. Its just like the case of the child or teenager, you are not paying the cost. Although this forgiveness, this Grace is free to us. It cost God the live of his only son .

So we need to respond to this love, and enter into this disproportionate relationship with Jesus, but the question today is about the cost of following Jesus. What is it? What should we expect as we make a response to his love and want to please him.

The question I am asking today is 'Should we be paying a cost' for following Jesus, and if so what is that cost. What does Jesus say about following him?

To help us answer this I want to look at a short passage from Luke, where Jesus engages three would-be followers. For each follower, I have a highlighted a cost. The first is being rejected, the second is submitting to Jesus (over the pulls of our cultural expectations) and the third is the need for endurance, even through some suffering. We are going then to focus a bit on the third would-be-follower and see why we need to keep looking forwards towards Jesus, and not looking back, in our mission.

### **Introduce Context of passage:-**

We find Jesus on a Mission. He has come down the Mount of Transfiguration and has set his face resolutely Southwards towards Jerusalem, and his heading from the North down through the mountainous area of Samaria, where the Samaritans would not let him stay. He knows the cost of this mission will be suffering, rejection and physical death, but he knows he must do it. He presses southwards to the capital, and on this road he has 3 recorded encounters with 'would-be followers'.

### **Rejection ( Would-be follower 1)**

<sup>57</sup> As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." <sup>58</sup> Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

The first man approaches Jesus and says that he will follow him anywhere. He offers himself to Jesus. One amazing thing about Jesus is that even before we meet him, he knows us. He doesn't just hear what we say, but he knows where it comes from, he seems to know what is in our heart. We can see this too, with the many recorded encounters he has in the Gospels. On the face of it, this is great news isn't it, a committed life-long follower appears out of no-where. But Jesus can see that in this man, there is a shallowness in understanding what it means to follow him. The Jews expectations of a coming Messiah, is one that comes in Power, dominion and glory. The response from Jesus to this would-be follower is far from encouraging.

Foxes have holes, and Birds have roosts, but the Son of Man has no-where to lay his head. In one sense of course Jesus does sleep, going from place to place he does find hospitality and a place to lie down his head. But in another sense, he has become a well-known figure that holds a political threat, in an oppressed country which is under the

tyrannical rule of the Romans and their puppet Herodian kings. He has been often crossing the borders of Palestine into safer Gentile countries and back again.

Jesus is no doubt the common persons hero leader, he has claimed to be THE leader, the long awaited Jewish messiah, the son of God, but this is a very different leader, a very different Messiah to what the Jews have been expecting. He is a rejected leader. He is rejected by the religious and learned people of his day, the Pharisees, the Levite priests and scribes of the day. He has been rejected at the synagogue in his own home town. He has been rejected hospitality, and the trip he is now taking Southwards is towards Jerusalem and to his death. He will heal 10 lepers, and just one will come back to follow him – the others will reject him. When he reaches Jerusalem, bar a small number, his disciples, friends and family will desert him at the Cross. He tells this would-be follower that he is a rejected leader, and there is a cost to that.

As we take on board Jesus, then we will also be sharing in his rejection. Some will listen to the Good News we have about Jesus and respond, but many will reject this and reject us. However Jesus said his yoke was easy and his burden light. Any rejection we get is outweighed by the joy of leading people to Jesus (who do not reject him or us) and by the overwhelming acceptance we have from Jesus, no matter who we are or what we have done.

### **Submission ( Would-be follower 2)**

<sup>59</sup> He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”<sup>60</sup> Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The second ‘would-be follower’ on the road from Samaria to Jerusalem, is approached by Jesus this time. Jesus challenges the man to follow Him. This time, the man responds ‘Lord, let me go first to bury my Father’. Jesus responds ‘Let the dead bury their own dead – you go and pronounce the Kingdom of God’.

To our ears, in our culture, it sounds like a reasonable request. Jesus – I really want to follow you, but my Dad is on death's door, and I need to finish off the funeral arrangements first. But that is not what he was saying. If his Dad had died he wouldn't be hanging around the side of a road, he **would** be busy sorting out funeral arrangements. This man is looking long into the future, with no realisation of course that Jesus had very little time left to live, and this would be the only opportunity he will get to follow Jesus, at least in his physical form.

The Middle Eastern phrase ‘let me go and bury’ means ‘let me go and serve my Father whilst he is alive, and after he dies (perhaps another 20 years), then I will leave my home and follow you, with my family duties done and complete. So the phrase refers specifically to the duty of the son to remain at home and take care of his parents until they are dutifully laid to rest. Such phrases may still be heard in the isolated villages of Syria and Lebanon today.

So in response to the challenge of Jesus to be a follower, the young man is countering the request with “Surely you do not expect me to go against the expectations laid on me by my community, and forsake those things to follow you?”. The answer from Jesus is Yes, that exactly what I expect of you. He says let the dead bury their own dead – or in other words, your parents are quite capable of looking after themselves. Don't be the same as everyone else, but break with tradition, come with me and help advance God's kingdom on Earth. Don't submit to the expectations of your family and community. Instead submit to me, and follow my expectations which are counter-cultural. I am bringing a new order, a new Way. Before the term Christian was used, believers called themselves the Way, after the new Way of living that Jesus had introduced them to.

That was a tough calling for the lad, and it can be a tough calling for us today too. Putting Jesus first in our lives, meeting up to his expectations sometimes at the expense of our families and friends. We may no longer be able to behave in the ways they expect of us, as the balance of what we do with our time and our money, our careers and our futures start aligning with what we believe Jesus wants for us.

### **Need for Endurance ( Would-be follower 3)**

<sup>61</sup> Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”<sup>62</sup> Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

The third would-be follower engaged along this road, himself offered to follow Jesus but with a caveat, with a condition. I will follow you Lord, but first go and take leave of those at my home. But Jesus says ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is of any use to the Kingdom of God’.

Again this sounds like a reasonable request to us. What we hear is this ‘Jesus, I want to follow you, but if you could hang loose here for a while and wait for me, cause I need to go and tell my folks what I am doing and say goodbye to them. It would be rude to just disappear’.

But again that is not what the young man is saying. He is saying that he needs to go and ‘ask leave’ from his family. The tradition is that if you are leaving, you request permission from those you are leaving – As he is about to leave he will say ‘With your permission?’, and the response might be ‘May you go in Peace’ or ‘God go with you’. The point here is that the would-be follower wants to go home and ask permission from those at his home (i.e. his parents). Most people listening to this dialogue knows that naturally his Father will refuse him permission to go off on this questionable enterprise. He wants to submit first to his parents authority, and seek permission to follow Jesus. Again he is acting out of his cultural norm. “I will follow you Lord, but of course the authority of my Father is higher than your authority over me, and I must have his permission before I venture out”.

In the Middle Eastern world, the **authority of the Father is supreme**. It helps explain why the phrase ‘The Father’ became symbolic of our creator God, the first person of the Trinity. It would have been a **shocking concept** for those hearing Jesus say that **he held a higher authority** than the Man’s Father, especially as Jesus was a relatively young man himself.

Again, I think Jesus knows the heart of this young man, and my impression is that he has made up his mind to follow Jesus, and thinks he will get his Father’s blessing. Jesus knows he won’t. Having made this decision in his heart to follow Jesus, then Jesus wants him to come and not look back. His disciples, having made their decision to follow him, did not go back and bury their dead, they did not go back and ask for leave, they left their nets and followed him. They decided, and they did it.

The response of Jesus to this third man is worth a closer look. “No one who puts his hand to the plow, and looks back is of any use in the Kingdom of God”.

It is clearly an agricultural analogy that would have been understood by his listeners, who were familiar with the light Palestinian plough. The farmer could guide the plough with his left hand, keep it upright and regulate how deep the plough went by the pressure he applied to it, At the same time in his right hand he has a 6 foot long stick with an iron spike on the end, with which he would drive forwards an unruly pair of oxen that are pulling the plough. The oxen are kept apart at the right distance by a sturdy wooden yoke that attached round their necks, It’s a hard job to keep the furrow straight. The farmer needed dexterity and real concentration. It’s no good him looking back at something else.

Jesus is telling the man, that anyone who follow him, must break links with the things that distract him, and focus on the coming Kingdom of God.

Ploughing was a precise operation with a series of ploughing operations, for providing drainage, furrows for planting, then for covering seed with soil. A lack of concentration could cause a number of serious problems, he might catch the plough on a rock, and break its tip, he might cut back into a previous furrow and destroy work already done. He might plough off direction into unploughed soil and make it much harder to do any subsequent work on new furrows. He might damage the drainage system or might leave seeds uncovered. The ploughman has to work in harmony with the work already done, and work yet to be accomplished, and work as a team with his plough and oxen.

So a distracted farmer will not only be unproductive himself, but could harm work that had gone before him, and prevent the good work that would have followed his contribution had he got it right. His present work affects both the past and the future.

The Talmud states that a 'Father & Son' are seen as one person, as are a Master with his disciple. Becoming the student/disciple of a Rabbi is not the matter of 'signing up for a course' but is the cementing of a life-long relationship to a person. Jesus is clear that this relationship must take precedence over all other relationships.

*Mt 11 v29-30* <sup>29</sup> *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* <sup>30</sup> *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Jesus invites us to become one with him, to be yoked with him, then like the farmer and the Oxen, acting as one to get the job done. He says that if we align with him then the yoke will be easy, it is easy to be with Jesus, and the burden on us light. He does not say that there is no burden, there is no cost.

This could be compared then to the the hard yoke of the religious rulers of his day, the Pharisees. These were a religious group of men, who had hundreds of additional rules that were supposed to keep you pure and from sinning. The word Pharisee means "separated." They considered themselves more holy and righteous than ordinary men. Their rules and regulation were a very heavy burden to bear. In contrast following Jesus is much easier, but only if we are concentrating on him, and we keep looking forwards. If we are distracted by our past, keep looking back, the the yoke will not be easy, but will hurt more as we twist and turn in it.

So if we concentrate on Jesus, and make him our focus and our priority over all other things, then we will accomplish the things he has us to do, in harmony with the work of others before us and after us, If we don't, and keep going on the wrong track, we not only fail in our own work but can be damaging the good work of Christians before us, and harming the work that was to follow by others. So the message is that the disciples with divided loyalties is a disruptive force in the work of the Kingdom, and is unfit to participate in it.

### **Don't go back to Egypt.**

There is a big temptation for some to look back, no matter how difficult your past may have been. The Israelites had become slaves in Egypt.

*Exodus 1v12-14* The Egyptians came to fear the Israelites and made their lives miserable by forcing them into cruel slavery. They made them work on their building programmes and in their fields and they had no mercy on them.

Moses delivered the people out of Egypt in the great Exodus, but when they came into harder times, they complained.

*Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water. The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the desert where the whole community grumbled against Moses and his brother Aaron.* <sup>3</sup> *The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve..... Moses said You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD.*

They quickly forgot the wonderful oasis at Elim, but were focussed on the desert ahead and wanted to go back. This was just before God was about to do a miracle where they would have food provided from them everyday in the provision of quails (small tasty birds) and a bread like substance called Mannah. It was looking tough and with a selective memory that thought back to the food in Egypt, whilst overlooking the cruel bondage they had been in. The Israelites quickly forgot the weight of their burden in Egypt. They succumbed to a common quirk of human nature—feeling that "the grass is always greener on the other side." Think of your own life for a moment. When you are in the midst of a trial, does your mind drift back to earlier in your life—and somehow you find yourself thinking that those were the "good old days"? A verse in Ecclesiastes (7v10) gives some instruction concerning this tendency: Never ask, "Oh, why were things so much better in the old days?" It's not an intelligent question.

Jesus is saying we must not be distracted, but must also not look backwards. Focus on where we are going with him, not where we have come from. Before we met Jesus we were slaves to our sins, but we were set free. We have left captivity and willingly yoked ourselves, joined ourselves to Jesus, whose said his yoke is easy and his burden light, so we should trust him, press forward with him. Like the Israelites, the next miracle, the next provision, could be just round the next corner.

Some people having a tough time, say things like oh yes and the devil did this to me, and then the devil did something else – Ok fair enough, you're having a tough time, but what about Jesus, more importantly what's He doing?

It is a mission, it does require some focus and effort to keep going. Your Christian journey, your mission in following Jesus, will no doubt take you into some desert areas, or some dark valleys which will make you fearful and give you the urge to back. Jesus is saying don't look back. If you are distracted you will not only harm the good work you have already started, but could damage the work of those that have gone before you, and even the work of those that would have followed you.

### **Putting in the effort**

Also the plough analogy shows us that to follow Jesus is not defined as a 'warm fuzzy' inside or a new intellectual understanding, but is more happily compared to a strenuous, creative and all consuming task like the ploughman had. For me that's good. I want a task, I want a mission, I like putting the effort in. I want the yoke. It's when I'm pulled in various directions and distracted, that I feel at odds. It's when I don't know what God wants me to do – I'm thrashing around in the shadows in the valley, that I feel unhappier.

### **Ending**

['If you love me, you will keep my commandments' – John 14v15](#)

As Christians, we receive the free gift of Grace, and we enter into a loving relationship with God, with Jesus, that's why we serve him. We take on board the name of Christ. Our mission is all about him. When Jesus said to the second man, you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God. That is what we do, by following Jesus, pleasing him, following his heart from our community, our country and the wider world. It's all about Jesus Christ. If you take the word Christ out of the word Christian, what have you got left. Ian ? I-A-N It's about Nothing? As followers of Jesus Christ we are all about Jesus, and in knowing the cost he paid we respond to his love and forgiveness.

So Yes, we do have to do Mission, and there is a cost. The cost will include sharing in his rejection, not everyone will want to hear about Jesus from you, or even want to know you any more because you follow Jesus. However his yoke is easy and his burden is light. As we reach out to others, there will be that do response positively, and we will have the excitement of leading them into Faith with Jesus. Then there is the overwhelming acceptance we get from Jesus no matter who we are, or what we have done. These things far outweigh the rejection.

The cost includes breaking with the culture norms and expectations. The criticism and those that 'should' on you. You should do this. You shouldn't do that. However Jesus' yoke was easy and his burden is light, and we find as we make this stand for Jesus, we find where-ever we go there are other Christians, also making a stand who identify with us, our generous to us and encourage us to keep going.

The cost includes endurance and suffering, as we progress into desert areas on our journey as we follow Jesus. The past tempts us to look back, but we must not, we must keep looking ahead to Him for his yoke easy and his burden is light. There will be tough treks, but also places to rest and enjoy the view. He promises to be with us always.

We can't carry out purposefully doing wrong because we know we are forgiven, but we persevere in doing good, in doing the good things that he has laid out for our life. Putting the effort in, like the ploughman, keep looking ahead towards Jesus and his mission, not back at the things that will distract us, or have come against us in the past. If we

hit a desert period in our life, doubts and rebellion may build up in us, and although it's tough we have to look forwards not back. We can't go back to the last Oasis, we can't go back to our old life. The future kingdom of God, is not just in heaven when we die, but it is the work of Jesus here, now, being different, and making a positive difference to the work we live in.

I have been an engineer for over 30 years and if my jobs had all been 'walks in the park' then it would have been a terrible waste of a career. Its succeeding in the real missions of work that have ultimately made it enjoyable and worthwhile. And on our Mission with Jesus he prompts us to be joyful always, enjoy following him, take your breaks and rest in Him, enjoy the views. I once did a day trek up the Annapurna mountains in Nepal, and arrived at our high altitude destination after dark exhausted, but in the morning we got up at daybreak and the view was absolutely incredible.

Don't look back, keep focussed on Jesus, following Him is our mission, and do all you can to enjoy the journey as you move into his promises.

Amen.