

NEW BEGINNINGS – NEW FOLLOWERS

(Read John 1 v35-42)

Introduction

John's account of the calling of the disciples is significantly different from that of the other Gospel writers. John places the first encounter of the potential disciples in the context of John the Baptist's continuing desire to point away from himself. He says to two of his own 'disciples' as Jesus passes by

'Look the Lamb of God!'. v35

This repeated assertion of Jesus' identity (cf v29) is this time specifically directed towards to the two disciples who had up until then 'followed' him. Because of this declaration, which presumably they had heard before, these two disciples began to follow Jesus.

When the two disciples heard this, they followed him.

Putting it simply they had been 'following' John and now they 'follow' Jesus.

- By contrast Mark places the calling of the disciples in the context of Jesus taking the initiative in calling Simon and Andrew as they were fishing in Galilee.

'Come follow me

and I will make you fishes of men' Mark 1:17

- Matthew follows Mark's account.
- Luke only varies this with an account of Jesus physically getting in Simon's boat and through his guidance amazingly catch a boat load of fish, yet the same words as Mark are used

'from now on you will catch men' Luke 5 v10

It is therefore clear that **John has a specific purpose in relating how the first disciples came to follow Jesus.** He appears to **emphasise the role of the potential disciples in their desire to 'follow'** as they were already followers of John and they appear to take the initiative by starting to follow Jesus.

Our desire to Follow Jesus

Three factors appear to influence our desire to follow Jesus.

1) The attitudes towards following Jesus we have inherited.

As we were reminded last week the title 'Lamb of God' would have been linked to Jesus being the longed for Messiah whose sacrifice would restore the fortunes of his people? The wider historical context, which these followers of John would have known, is that of God's deliverance of his people at the time of Moses when they were released from Slavery in Egypt through the Plagues inflicted on the Egyptians particular the passing over of the final plague signified by the sacrifice of a lamb whose blood was painted on the doorpost and lintel of all houses belonging to the Hebrews. There is enough evidence in John's Gospel to suggest that he is shaping the material as a form of 'second Exodus' and it is that story, which in the culture of their day and still to today in Jewish community, is one of their defining stories, something that illustrates their identity. A very poor analogy would be stories of WWII which shape to a certain extent our identity with the heroic nature of Dunkirk, the leadership of Churchill, the Battle of Britain and the D Day landings being events that continue to shape us and inform our identity. From time to time politician's have evoked the spirit of those times and urged followership perhaps most recently with Margaret Thatcher and the famous photograph of her in a tank.

Application

What are our defining stories that have shaped us and influence our attitude and expectation of following Jesus?

In what ways do these stories so captivate us that we 'follow' them, allow them to shape our lives?. We all have these defining stories whether shared nationally, within sub cultures of our society (e.g. mining folklore; agricultural settings where land is passed from one generation to the next giving a settled and somewhat fixed outlook on life) and within families.

Another factor that influences our desire to follow Jesus is

2) The level of commitment we are prepared to give to following Jesus.

Another cultural feature we have to understand from the text is that these accounts of beginning to follow Jesus includes the concept of being a **'disciple'** and this is an alien concept in Western society.

When we speak of *'followers'* we may think of the allegiance some have to a football club. They show their allegiance by supporting their club, by attending the matches with the more ardent followers even going to away games. Many choose to wear the shirts worn by their club to signify their followership even when not at a game and also to differentiate themselves from followers of other clubs.

Something much more **life changing** is going on though when we think of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Jesus. It is suggested in the encounter that these two disciples have with Jesus.

In responding to the first recorded words of Jesus in John's gospel

'What do you want?'

they call him

Teacher – Rabbi

and then they ask what may seem a strange question

'where are you staying?'

The clue to this is in understanding the relationship between a Rabbi and his disciples. Rob Bell in his marvellous and very accessible book *'Velvet Elvis'*, explains the rabbinical tradition of that time. He captures wonderfully the supreme importance the people of God gave to the Law of God and their need to pass it on to the next generation. Education was not just a luxury but vital to life. To know the Torah and to apply it to life was essential to their survival as a people. As I witnessed in Jerusalem there are many rabbinical schools with followers of rabbis literally following their leaders around. They hang off every word spoken of the 'Rabbi' – (Teacher) as they memorize the word of God, firstly the five books of the Law (the Torah) and then the whole of what we describe as the Old Testament. They would become accustomed to the oral tradition of questioning and wrestling with the text and learn all that had been spoken about different texts by different rabbi's down the ages. The emphasis was on understanding and applying the scriptures to life not just repeating back information. The brightest of those who had started on this path at about the age of six would be chosen to be one of the rabbi's disciples (talmidim) as these were those who not just to know what the rabbi know but **be like the rabbi**. If the follower was good enough in the eyes of the rabbi he would give up everything to literally follow the rabbi wherever they went leaving their families and potential work in the family business. The disciple gives up the whole of his life to be like the rabbi.

Therefore when these potential disciples ask to see where Jesus is staying they are indicating **their willingness to give up the whole of their lives to following him, to becoming like him.**

This is a far cry from church attendance or from treating the Christian faith as some form of leisure activity interesting and worthy of our allegiance as long as we get something out of it. In our culture, affected as we are by a consumer culture and rampant individualism, this concept of being a disciple is alien and somewhat daunting. We know that these two disciples of John were used to

- fasting and praying,
- confronting the Jewish leaders of their day
- and their fellow disciples stayed loyal to John during his imprisonment and his death.

We have in the culture of the church in the West an overwhelming consumerist attitude to the level of our commitment to following Jesus.

I never tire of quoting David Watson that fine Evangelical Preacher who has done so much to shape an Anglican expression of what it means to live as a Disciple in our culture.

*The vast majority of western Christians are
church members, pew fillers, hymn, singers, sermon tasters, Bible readers,
even born again believers
or Spirit filled charismatic's –
but not true disciples of Jesus.*

He continues

*If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship
and actually to become disciples,
the church in the West would be transformed,
and the resultant impact on society would be staggering.*

David Watson 'Discipleship 16

One of the reasons our key text is Matthew 28:19 is because it emphasizes that what we are about here at St John's is becoming or being made into disciples.

Jesus said 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations'

We know that many of us start on the outer fringes of belief in Jesus and that is fine, but he draws us nearer as he drew these two disciples of John nearer.

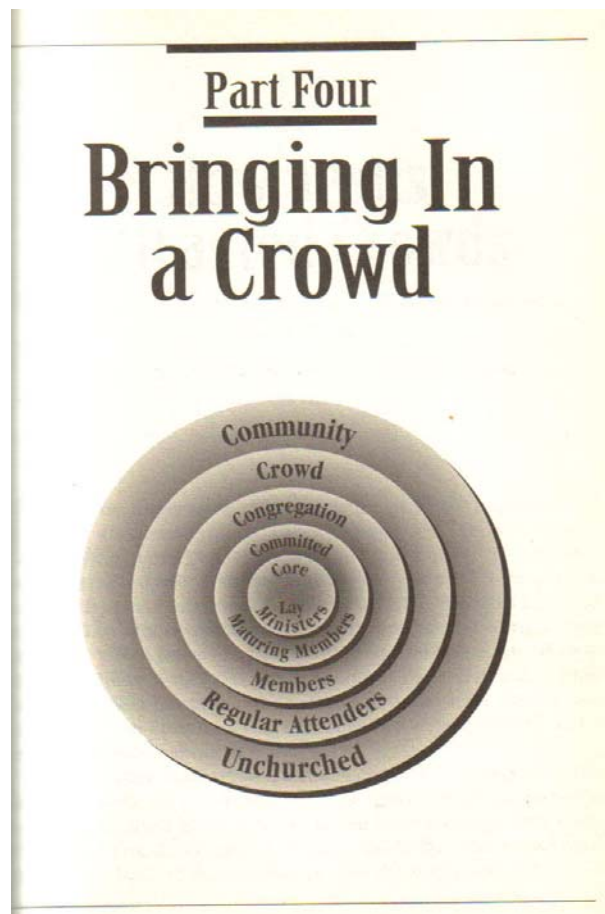
'Come and you will see' (v39)

Application

Rick Warren in his book *'The Purpose Driven Church'* provides a useful diagram to help us think through and be honest about our level of commitment to follow Jesus.

Have a look at this and decide honestly where you think you are and why and perhaps also indicate where you would like to be and why.

If you are willing to, share this with other members of the group. This might provide an opportunity for supporting each other in prayer.



The third and final factor that influences our desire to be a follower of Jesus is

3) Our willingness to change the way we live

Jesus seeks to draw people in by

- firstly loving them,
- then meeting their needs
- and then teaching and challenging in an interesting and often provocative way.

Maybe we can hear the challenge of Jesus to draw us in through the first recorded words of Jesus in John's gospel

What do you want? v37

It is almost as though John is linking back to Jesus being 'the Word', the active aspect of God that brings all things into being, the Logos the Divine Spark that which binds all things together. (John 1v1)

To be a new follower suggests change.

- It was a change in **allegiance** in their case from John the Baptist to Jesus
- It was a change of **intimacy** in relationship to Jesus. They move from only knowing Jesus from a distance to spending the rest of that day and overnight in his company. (Now when we were visiting I got invited into a number of homes but to have stayed over night would have indicated a much greater degree of friendship!)
- It was a change that promoted Andrew to **practical action** in finding his brother Simon claiming that he had found the Messiah (that is the Christ) and bringing him to Jesus. [Once more John shows his concern that Jesus is for everyone by uniquely explaining that he is both Messiah (Jewish title) and the Christ (the Greek version of the same title)]
- It includes a change of **character** indicated by a change of name from Simon to Peter, the Rock. Yet as the NIV notes he was anything but!. He is named not for who he is but for what he will become.

Application

One writer comments

'John wishes to show the Logos-Christ (The Word) confronting men and challenging their intentions.'

What is it that you want in life?

What changes.

of allegiance ,

of intimacy with Jesus,

of practical action in bringing others,

of your own character

are happening in your life because of your following of Jesus?

Conclusion

If the incident with Andrew and the other unnamed disciple (most likely John himself) concentrates on our desire to follow, the incident with Philip and Nathanael represents **Jesus active calling** for us to follow him. (Read John 1 v43-51)

Jesus call to follow him

Finding Philip he said to him *'Follow me'* in much the same way that we are familiar with in the other Gospel accounts of the calling of the disciples. What John appears to be giving emphasis to, as indicated by the rather supernatural call of Nathanael, is Jesus initiative, his call. **His choosing is vital alongside our desire to want to follow him.**

Tom Wright states

*they thought that they were looking for him
but they didn't realise the Messiah was looking for them*

- Perhaps you have been asked by someone to take a closer look. Perhaps you are on some form of quest, wondering how life fits together perhaps reacting to events in your life.
- Perhaps you are aware that Jesus in some amazing way has called into your life because he has seen you even before you saw him.

As we shall see from now on John shapes the earlier part of his Gospel around miraculous signs, starting with the water changing into wine that each reveal some aspect of the true nature of Jesus unpacked through the great ***I am*** sayings.

The first hint of these 'signs' has been given in his calling of Nathanael but John is quick to establish that those who believe without having had their benefit of seeing these signs for themselves (his readership and by extension us.) will see even greater things (v50) (John 14:12).

Jesus is not just another Rabbi, another teacher. He is the one who connects heaven and earth. It is following him and our relationship to him that is the gateway into the presence of God. It is not about going to a building at a certain time in certain place be that the Temple where the word of God dwelt and sacrifices of lambs were made or at Bethel as revealed to Jacob in his dream (Gen 28:12).

Rather our very connection to the presence of God is through following and becoming like Jesus Christ. To be a follower of Jesus is 24 hours a day 7 days a week and for the whole of this life & the life that is to come. It is not about just 'going to' church but about following a person with all others who follow him and about 'being church' wherever we are.

To come.....

The next section of John's Gospel (John 2 -12v12) concentrates on the nature of this person we seek to follow and become like.

Our next series will consider this by examining in turn the '**I am** sayings' of Jesus as recorded by John.