

Follow Me – the Call to Discipleship

So today we turn our attention to the fifth chapter of Paula Gooder's book Let Me Go There – the Spirit of Lent, which we've been reading and studying in this season of Lent.

So far, we've considered the wilderness, first through the history of God's people – we've seen both the hope and despair of wilderness and then we've looked at Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

This week Paula directs us to consider the call of the first disciples - both our passages we read today, from Matthew and Luke, Paula explores in greater detail in her reflections this week.

What I offer now is an introduction to those passages to get us all thinking,
what does it mean for me, for us to follow after Christ?

And so let us pray together –
Father God,
we ask now that as we consider your word,
you would speak to us,
encourage us, show us those things that are of importance to us,
fill us afresh with you Spirit,
that our thoughts and meditations now might be fixed on you. Amen

So up until now we've been with Jesus as he was tempted in the wilderness –
but as soon as the devil's testings are over, Matthew's gospel tells us,
that Jesus began to preach and proclaim that now was the time for the people to repent,
that is to turn, for the kingdom of heaven was close at hand.

And the very first thing that Jesus does, as he walks along the shores of Galilee, is to call
Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow after him.

Now at this time, Rabbis, were the Jewish teachers of the time,
they were always men at this point –
and they would often look for talented, bright, gifted students to join with them and learn
alongside them.

And so, at first analysis,
it could be argued that this is what Jesus is doing here....
Except one major difference.

The Rabbi – discipleship relationship was normally shaped around recognising the talent of someone who was intent on studying Jewish law and inviting them to leave home and travel with the Rabbi in to order to learn both how the Rabbi understood the law and how this affected the way he saw the world in which he lived.

In other words, disciples were normally already students, who were seeking new and greater challenges.

Bright students who were destined to go far.

Being a disciple fitted in, slotted in nicely with the life path they had chosen.

The striking feature of this passage is that neither Simon, or Andrew, or indeed James or John were looking for a Rabbi from which to learn.

They were all engaged in fishing.... working at their trade,
for all we know they expected to do this for the rest of their lives.

This sudden, out of the blue, invitation from Jesus would have been a complete surprise, a shock.

This invitation would have turned their lives upside down...

as they chose to follow him they left behind their livelihood, their families, everything they knew and held dear.

Paula shares how she is often asked how did she end up where she is now?

And that is a question I am often asked too?

Often people think or assume that I planned to train and be ordained as a priest in the Church of England....

Well I can assure you, that was never the case,
in fact, if you had told me ten years ago that I would be a Vicar one day,
I would have laughed...

rather incredulously, never believing that life as a Vicar was part of God's plan for me.

I have, like Paula, tried to live with my life open to the calling of Jesus,

but that makes it sound as though my calling had always been clear,

like that of Jesus to Simon... but far from it.

So much of what Paula shares about her following resonates deeply with me.

There are, and have been many times when I have lived through periods of doubt, fogginess, where the next step feels far from clear, it has been shaky, uncertain and vague...

but as I have dared to take each step, as I have followed,

I have been brought to places which I could never have planned for,

and experienced and encountered God in all sorts of amazing ways.

And so, I wonder, what did it feel like for those first disciples.

Did they have any idea of the enormity of what lay ahead as they chose to leave their nets behind that day?

Did they have any idea that in a few decades they would be travelling through their area proclaiming the Kingdom, the amazing news of Jesus' death and resurrection to all that they met?

Now as Jesus calls these early disciples he says follow me, and I will make you fish for people.

Here Jesus' call wasn't to 'follow me and I will teach you how to emulate me'...

or 'follow me and I will give you the right formula to be transformed'....

or 'follow me and I will make you effective communicators'.....

the call was not to a learning based in head knowledge and understanding,

but rather to a learning that involved asking questions,

watching, having a go,

making mistakes, getting things wrong,

but having another go.

The learning Jesus called his disciples to, was an active learning, with an active outcome.

But what does it mean to fish for people?

Well Paula explores this in more depth – but at the heart was a training to be disciples who would challenge others to reach a place of decision – a place where they had to decide who they and God really are.

The discipleship Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James and John to was not for their own benefit, but he summoned them to action for the kingdom, to join him in proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and to bring people to a moment of decision.

Our second passage this morning, Paula explores in reflection 28 in her chapter.

It is a passage that I have often thought about.

I'm not going to repeat here Paula's message, other than to say I agree with her completely, that this passage is very offensive.

It is full of demands that are harsh, brutal and even rude,
it hits home full-force.

As we read verses 57 through 62 they seem repetitive; three times we read that that following Jesus is costly.

Three times, as Jesus is travelling along the road, a person approaches Jesus, presenting as a potential disciple, saying that they want to follow.

Each person wants to follow Jesus, but each has a condition attached.

Each individual wants to follow Jesus, but each has an excuse.

Jesus challenges each one,

Are they ready to drop what they are doing and follow after Him?

Let's look at each example briefly:

We begin by looking at Jesus' conversation with the first person.

This person states that they will follow Jesus anywhere, 'wherever you may go.'

It reminds me of the story of Ruth and Naomi.... Ruth promises Naomi that despite all their misfortune, she will stick with Naomi, and follow her wherever she may go.

But back to this encounter.... Jesus makes it clear that following him may mean you have no home. Jesus says “Foxes have holes, the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Jesus seems to be saying that following him may involve sacrifice and a willingness to let go of physical comforts and securities.

To the second individual who first wants to go and bury his Father.

Jesus replies no and tells him to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Again, this seems very strong and brutal....

This man has reached a crucial moment, a chance to follow God.

A chance not to be missed.

There is some debate as to whether this man’s father is dead already or not.

It would have been the custom then to bury the dead within 24 hours. But then after a year, once the family have mourned, the bones would be dug up, and laid to rest in an alcove or small cave, along with the bones of the rest of the ancestors.

So, either this person's father may well still have been alive or this may well have been a request to wait at least a year.

Either way it was an excuse for not following Jesus immediately.

Jesus seems to be saying to this person don’t make an excuse trying to guess what may/or may not happen in the future.

Make your decision now.

To the third individual - who promises to follow Jesus but first wants to say good bye to his family

Jesus says, “no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Now I'm told it is impossible to plough a straight furrow if you are looking back over your shoulder.

You just can't do it.

You need to be focused on the task in hand.

If you lose concentration even for a moment the whole endeavour is ruined.

I know from experience that it's a bit like trying to swim front crawl while constantly trying to peer backwards over your shoulder.

It just doesn't work – you end up going wonky and swallowing way too much water.

Jesus is perhaps suggesting that looking back, whether to friends or family or to the good old days, is not always helpful.

Jesus seems to make it very clear to all three individuals
that following Him will come at a cost.

Jesus seems to be saying he doesn't want half-hearted service
but those who will follow whole heartedly.

I find it interesting, that Luke does not record the responses of these 3 would be disciples.

We are left with the question which Luke intends to pass on – will we follow Jesus at any cost?

So here we see a challenge to all potential followers/disciples of Christ.

There is a clear challenge to be committed to discipleship, beyond all other demands.

That means for you and for me, we need to have God and His kingdom central to all we do.

This will almost certainly involve us making or being prepared to make sacrifices.

To leave behind our comforts and safety.

God may not call us to leave our homes or our beds,

but are we prepared to leave behind anything that may get in the way of doing God's will?

This may at times mean making hard decisions.

This may mean moving away from friends and family – our communities.

It may make us unpopular.

We may feel isolated, like we're travelling against the tide.

Following Jesus also means we need to be free from the past.

We should not dwell on the past or think ever wishfully of pastimes.

I know how easy this is to do; I often look back fondly on the good old days.

But it's not helpful if we're trying to plough forwards.

Looking back takes our attention away from now and what is ahead.

So, discipleship is demanding and costly... whether we hear the call for the first time, or after many years of following, the challenge for each of us is what gets in the way...what excuses do we make?...

Following Jesus involves making that choice, that commitment each day to follow whatever the cost.

And so, as we think about those early disciples, my guess, like Paula's,

is many of them, if not all,

had little idea of what responding to Jesus' call to follow would mean.

They did what many of us have done.

Jesus called, they followed.

It made no sense at all; and yet it made all the sense in the world.

And one further quick aside..... Jesus doesn't just call just a few individuals.

God doesn't just call leaders, priests, missionaries, those involved in church ministries.

No God calls every one of us, women and men, from all walks of life, all ethnicities, all ages, in all sorts of circumstances to share in his Kingdom work.

If we had continued in our passage from Luke we would have seen that Jesus goes on to call many, many more people, those who will work in their everyday communities, jobs, homes and neighbourhoods, to live distinctively as salt, as light, to point people towards Jesus, to challenge people to repent and turn.

And so to finish, some last words from Paula :

following Jesus involves tearing up your life plan and throwing it to the wind,

following Jesus may change everything about your life, or just some of it;

following Jesus summons you to the biggest adventure of your life.

It is hard, uncertain, often vague and unformed,

but it is the most exciting, challenging, satisfying thing you can ever do.

Amen