

Romans 6:1b-11**Matthew 10:24-39**

One of the parts of my childhood that I am very grateful for is the freedom we had. Because my father was a fighter pilot we usually lived on Air Force bases, especially when we lived abroad. The compound was strictly guarded and no one could get in without passing the guard on the gate.

This meant that as children we were allowed to roam anywhere we liked within the living part of the base. There was often a lot of open space with fields and woods and streams and we built dens and played games in the woods. One of the games we loved playing was follow my leader

Follow my leader can be great fun when the leaders is doing nice things and it is safe but when they start to take you into muddy bogs or to do dangerous things in trees you have to think twice about whether you will follow

If things get too difficult you might decide to turn back and go your own way.

Jesus called the disciples to follow him. They left their homes and their work and went around the country with Jesus. It was a wonderful time of miracles and large crowds following him. Life was a great adventure.

But Jesus knew that he was going to lead his followers into difficult and challenging places and that he would need to prepare them for what lay ahead.

Last week we heard how Jesus chose twelve of his closest followers and sent them out to preach the Good News and came back exhilarated and excited. They had seen God's power at work to change and to heal and they had seen God's power defeating the devil. But Jesus knew it wasn't all going to be easy. They would be called names. They would be arrested for following him. There would be division in their families where some could not understand or accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord. There were challenging times ahead.

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And Jesus tells them repeatedly 'Do not be afraid'. He had promised them the Holy Spirit to guide them, to give them the gifts they would need and the words to speak.

When they were sitting round the camp fire one evening Jesus asked them if they knew who he really was. After a while Peter said, "We know you are the Anointed one of God. You are the Christ." Peter was very excited about this because he believed that Jesus was very popular and powerful..

But Jesus warned them of the troubles ahead.

He told them that the elders, the chief priests and the scribes would reject him and that he would be killed.

Jesus didn't want to be killed but he knew that if he obeyed God and did God's work there would be opposition. He knew that there are always forces in this world working against God and if he chose to go God's way there would be trouble

Peter could not believe that the man he was following, that had given him joy and excitement, had shown himself to be powerful could simply allow himself to die.

He took Jesus aside and told him that it was not so. Jesus wished it wasn't so but he knew trouble lay ahead. Peter was trying to persuade him to run away or to hide or to go somewhere else. Peter did this because he loved Jesus , but Jesus saw that Satan was using Peter's love to tempt him. He spoke very strongly to his friend, "Get behind me Satan, for you have your mind not on God's things but on human things."

Jesus called people to follow him, but he never promised it would be easy.

In fact he called the crowd to join him and his disciples and spelled out the cost of following him.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

A few years ago a friend of mine was made redundant and used it as an opportunity to do some new things with his time. Apart from keeping fit he spent his time practicing Beethoven Sonatas on the piano and learning Hebrew. He put a lot of

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effort in and I was amazed the other day when he picked up a piece of Hebrew script like this one and read it out in Hebrew – fluently, without stumbling and then translated it into English. I was extremely impressed. But this wasn't something that had come easily – it had taken hours of study, and listening to tapes and practicing. He had committed himself to learning Hebrew – and commitment was what it involved

I have spent most of my life learning the piano- many of you will have seen the piano in my house ... But the trouble is I still can't play. That is because I get too busy and stop practicing and when I go back to play again my fingers are stiff and rusty and I can't read the music as well as I used to. If I really wanted to be good at playing the piano I would practice regularly instead of dipping in and out.

I heard a great quote the other day, "Some people follow Jesus as if they were following him on twitter!" Millions of people follow other people on twitter and dip in and out to see what they are doing or thinking, they reply and have discussions but it is a bit voyeuristic, a "What's he up to now?" rather than being committed to knowing or understanding someone. It's all a bit superficial.

What Jesus wants his disciples and the crowd, who have been attracted by his teaching and his miracles to know is that following him is anything but superficial. It means real commitment. It means having to deny our own desires, to put our concerns and inclinations aside and go where he leads us.

Columbanus was an Irish monk born in the 6th Century who believed God was calling him to serve him. His mother was very distressed by this and was afraid he would be wasting his life. He had lots of talent and ability and could be someone very important in Ireland. She talked to him and tried to persuade him not to go but he knew that God was calling him to serve him in a monastery. His mother tried everything she knew to stop him (without meaning to she was acting for Satan in trying to turn him away from what God was calling him to

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do.) Columbanus got ready to go. His mother went to the door of the house and lay across the doorway to stop him. Columbanus was very sorry to see his mother do this but he carefully stepped over her and went to serve God where he believed God was calling him. In time Columbanus did amazing work for God in France and Italy but it would have been very easy to have been persuaded to take the simpler way out and stay at home

This time of Lock down has given us challenges. In some ways life has become quite simple as we have just stayed at home. In other ways it has become much more difficult and we have had to find new ways of living. It has been hard not seeing others and not being able to come to church to worship but this could be a good time for us to look at the things that distract us from following Jesus.

What are the things that take our attention away from him? What are the things that we may feel are too difficult or demanding.

You see the marvellous thing about following Jesus is that we aren't doing it on our own. We aren't promised that it will be easy but Jesus calls us to go with him and he promises to be there with us, equipping us, enabling us, strengthening us and teaching us along the way