

Read: ²⁴ *Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

1. Last Sunday Jesus issued you with a direct challenge. A challenge that is still on the table today. In fact it’s a challenge that you’ll face, whether you realize it or not, every day of your life. He didn’t ask you about your doctrine or denominational affiliations. He didn’t ask you about your neighbours or family members – he came to you and asked you personally, ***“Who do you say that I am?”***

We know how Peter answered don’t we? He said, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”*

It wasn’t a flesh and blood moment or confession. The Father revealed this to Peter and reveals the same to you through the Word and power of the Holy Spirit. *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God?”*

Jesus is the one and only Christ. Not ‘a’ Christ or one of many.

- He is ‘the’ Christ who people run miles for just to touch his garments.
- The One whom multitudes fall at his feet seeking the kind of help only the Messiah can place in the empty hands of sinful and broken people.
- The One who makes powers, rulers and authorities cower and hide because of His supremacy and Lordship over all things. In Mark’s gospel it says that whenever the unclean spirits saw Jesus they would fall down before him and shout, *“You are the Son of God!”*

These kinds of reactions shouldn’t surprise us. It shouldn’t surprise us that people and even the forces of spiritual darkness would find themselves reverently face down before the King of Kings. You see when you confess with your mouth that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah and the Son of the living God – what you’re actually saying is this:

“Jesus, you ALONE are my Lord and King. You are the only real answer to all the question marks I face in my life this side of heaven. There is nothing higher or greater or more important than who you are and what you’ve done and continue to do for me... and for all who believe in you.” There are some pretty big implications in uttering those words aren’t there!? Particularly as we encounter today’s gospel...

Today this same Lord and King issues an invitation to you to follow Him. I don’t know about you, but that creates in me a kind of nervous excitement mixed with a big dose of reverent trembling. After really hearing what Jesus is saying in this text, it gives me every reason to stop what I’m doing and pause – to take stock of my own journey of discipleship. [PAUSE]

What about you: are you willing to follow Jesus? Are you willing to throw your life away in order to find it? Are you willing to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

2. Is that what Peter was thinking in the gospel? Jesus called him a ‘rock’ after his great confession. Then when Jesus starts talking about the absolute necessity of his own cross bearing and his death and resurrection, Peter breaks almost every social boundary by rebuking Jesus. The student puts himself in the place of the master. He thinks he’s on

the right path. He thinks he ‘gets it’ and the Son of God has lost it and in need of a theology lecture!

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

From ‘rock’ to ‘stumbling rock’ - even a satanic stumbling rock in a matter of minutes! Why? ***Jesus says it’s because of a mind filled with human centred concerns rather than the things of God.*** Satan is the inspiration behind people obsessing over greatness and success. God is the inspiration behind godly concern, humility and a servant heart.

How sobering is it that a person can go from confessing cosmic truth to becoming a satanic stumbling rock to others so quickly because of the desires and obsessions of the human heart?

And so Jesus uses this moment to teach disciples what authentic discipleship looks like. This kind of discipleship is radically different to the natural inclinations of your heart. That means it won’t come without pain and sacrifice.

V24 “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone wants to come ***behind me***¹, that person must turn away from oneself and take up one’s cross and live a life following me.’”

3. Have you ever seen a shop or business with a sign up saying, “UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT”?

That’s what’s on offer for you today. Maybe it seems strange that Jesus would invite seasoned disciples like you to get behind him today and follow - to come under new management. Know that this is simply a daily necessity for the people of God. It’s like putting on your clothes in the morning.

How often do you find yourself instinctively jumping into ‘THE MANAGER’ role and falling out of formation behind Jesus? We’re so used to doing it; we probably don’t notice that we are constantly grappling for control in all kinds of situations in every facet of life, including the church.

If this wasn’t true the church wouldn’t experience conflict over worship and service times. There wouldn’t be the constant remarks about all the things people think we should be doing and the ministries we shouldn’t be involved with.

Notice you rarely hear people talking about the joy of ministry? Why is that? Is it because people in the church are constantly falling out of formation and trying to steer the ship where they want it to go?

Coming back into formation behind Jesus; turning away from self is God’s way of releasing you from the grip of human centred concerns that get in the way of following Jesus. It’s

¹ Follow me is one way of translating the Greek, but ‘behind me’ seems to be the plainest reading!

giving up on yourself as ***‘lord of your own thinking’*** and coming under new management – Holy management.

This isn’t like giving up chocolate over lent – it is the realisation and acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord of your life – every part of your life. That is great news, even when the human heart fights and struggles to subordinate itself behind Jesus!

When push comes to shove, the choices you make in life, even *your way of life* will be ruled by where your allegiance lies. That’s why it’s easier to call Jesus saviour than to get on your knees and declare Jesus as your Lord and King.

It’s hard to walk behind and not try to push your way to the front when things aren’t happening the way you’d like them to.

Authentic discipleship operates behind Jesus – not in front of him. It says, “I’m not the Lord of my life – Jesus Christ is Lord.” Even when we don’t like what Jesus is calling us to be or do.

4. Peter didn’t want to hear of Jesus suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law and he rebuked the Son of God. It wasn’t the kind of following he had in mind.

- Thank God Peter didn’t get his own way!
- Thank God that Jesus is leading here and goes before us!

²¹ *From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go **[that it is necessary for him to go]** to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*

He must go. It is absolutely necessary. Necessary that Jesus’ suffers and dies for your sins.

- Necessary that the old Adam with all those control and lordship issues is crucified on the cross.
- Necessary that all of the hearts ***obsessions*** for worldly greatness and success are left at the foot of the cross and exchanged for what is truly great!

It’s also necessary that Jesus be raised from death on the third day.

Because you’re not called to follow a dead Christ.

You’re not called to follow an idea or a concept – but the man Jesus Christ. Jesus who was raised and who lives forever!

Jesus who calls you personally to come in behind Himself.

Who you were personally united with in your baptism – where you came under new management.

Jesus is present with His disciples, with you, every step of your journey through this life. We don’t worship an absent Christ, but Jesus who says, “...surely I am with you always until the very end of the age.”

That means when you take up your cross, you don’t walk alone – but in the nearness and presence of Jesus. He is near...

- When people laugh at you for not taking advantage because you knew it was deceitful or wrong in God’s sight – even though the world would have applauded (or at least affirmed) your actions.
- When you give your money away to meet a real need and you feel it because you had plans to spend or save it yourself.
- When you face rejection or mockery because you live a simple life or for your faith in Jesus.
- He’s there when you’re worried or anxious about people or things outside of your control.
- Jesus is present with you when you carry the cross of bad health or when people talk about you or your family behind your back.

Our crosses are many – but Jesus is greater and the rewards of being found in Him are out of this world!

5. To a perishing world, living under the cross has the appearance of losing everything that’s good in life –as if you’re throwing your life away.

Today Jesus says that living this *‘throw away life under the cross’* and believing that Jesus is right in what he’s teaching - you will actually save your life.

It’s not a throw away life at all. At the final judgement everyone will see who actually wins and who really loses in life. Jesus points to this today when he says, *“...what good will it do a person to have won the whole world but to have lost one’s own life?”* By life, Jesus is talking about eternal life.

But it requires effort on your part. It requires sacrifice. It means you won’t always get your own way. In exchange you will find real life, discover the true joy of ministry and service and walk in the confidence of the glory awaiting you at the final judgement day.

Jesus has issued a personal invitation to you today, to come in behind him, to submit and follow. To come once again under new management! It’s a question, not a demand. If you are willing just know that the path is set by the Lord, not you. That’s exactly the reason you will find life and ultimately win the prize that God has prepared for His people.

Question is are you content to follow behind Jesus – or will you try and go it alone?

May you choose life! In Jesus name, Amen.