

Following Jesus

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“All you need to do is kneel on the back of your board, put your hands on the front and push down so that you duck under the waves.”

That was the instruction my friend gave me as my first lesson on bodyboarding. The target was clear, get “out the back”. Apparently that’s where you go to wait for the waves that gently curve upwards, picking you up as they go and power you along like an ad in a surf magazine. The spray glistens in your windblown hair, your teeth shine as you carve a beautiful white wake through the pristine Dunedin surf. Yeah right.

In wet suit and flippers and clutching my new board, I followed my friend and stumbled into the surf.

The problem was before you get “out the back” you have to go through what I like to term “the death zone”. The place where the waves are just breaking or have just broken. And breaking and broken are entirely appropriate terms for this place.

It is here that you are supposed to implement the “duck dive” technique my friend had told me about.

Unfortunately something in my technique was not quite right, I knelt on the back, and pushed on the front, but as I saw this great heap of water looming above me crashing towards me like a great sea monster about to devour me, I sensed things were not going to go well.

Sure enough, I got hammered. I spun around, tumbled over, lost contact with my board and all sense of where on earth “out the back” was. At that point in time all I wanted to know was where “the air up there” was.

Eventually I popped to the surface, almost back on the beach, with my board cord wrapped around me, the board trailing limply behind me, and an overwhelming sense of “stuff “out the back,” I am getting out of here.”

I had initially thought I knew where I was going, in the end I learned I had no idea of how to get there or the commitment and effort it would take. My surf magazine image was quickly swamped by a mouthful of water and a cord wrapped around my legs.

In today’s reading from Luke, Jesus gives some would-be disciples a reality check about what following him or getting “out the back” really means. Jesus didn’t pull any punches about the difficulty of the journey ahead.

These four brief encounters speak to us today of the meaning of discipleship.

We find Jesus setting off resolutely towards Jerusalem. He knows this journey will lead to conflict with the Jewish and Roman authorities, that it will eventually take him to the Cross, (Luke 9:22). Yet he willingly chooses to be obedient, to do what His Father has sent him to do.

Encounter No. 1

The first encounter is with a Samaritan village that does not welcome him. The two hot-headed disciples James and John, nicknamed sons of thunder, are angry that these hated Samaritans would reject their beloved leader. They suggest calling down fire on the village that it might be destroyed.

But Jesus rebukes his disciples for this outrageous suggestion. They do not understand that Jesus has come to give life not destroy it. Jesus wanted to bring life to that village, just as he did for a Samaritan woman at a well later on in the Gospel of John.

This encounter reminds us that to follow Jesus is to love others even if they reject us. To refuse to be so hurt, angered, disgusted by them that we just write them off. Maybe we are more subtle than James and John. We may not wish for fire to reign down on our enemies head, but we may very well believe them to be too far away from God to even bother to love, serve, pray for or forgive them anymore. This is not Jesus' way.

Jesus suffered opposition without retaliating because he had come to save. He never writes anyone off. He never wrote us off but stands at the door of our lives waiting for us to respond. No one is beyond his reach. As Christ-followers we must serve out of love for others being prepared to share his story, no matter what the reaction might be.

Discipleship is about bringing life to all situations we find ourselves in – of sharing Jesus message with all, whether they accept it or reject it.

Encounter No.2

The second encounter is with a man who says he will follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus replies by saying he has nowhere to lay his head.

“Wherever you go?” – the man has no understanding of where Jesus is going? This is not a cruise ship he is signing up for. The way ahead will be hard. Is he prepared to follow beyond the comforts of home and bed. Does this speak to us of the need to be prepared to move? To travel beyond the security of what we know and where we are comfortable. To follow Jesus is to leave behind the safety of the beach and push on out into the waves, towards the deeper, more dangerous waters. Jesus reminds us of the homelessness of his calling.

Discipleship is about moving on. Jesus wants to be honest about that.

Encounter No.3

In the third encounter we find Jesus actually saying to a man “follow me”. The man's reply seems well-meaning. He asks if he can first “go and bury his father”. Not an unreasonable thing we might feel. Jesus' reply indicates that those who have not heard Jesus' message of the kingdom of God and the forgiveness of their sins are dead already. If this man's father is dead then let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead and let those who know the way to new life speak it out to all they can. The urgent work of the kingdom cannot be delayed.

There is no indication that the man's father is dead yet and so waiting for that to happen might mean days, weeks or even years. Jesus knows this man and his situation, and he calls to him “follow me”. “No excuse” for delay is reasonable.

When Jesus calls, he requires an answer and an action. To put off following Jesus for any other worldly pursuit is to deny the invitation to follow, and to reject the one who invites us.

The way of discipleship requires us to respond to Jesus' invitation without delay.

Encounter No.4

The fourth encounter also challenges the cultural thinking of the day. Again a man says he will follow Jesus, but he asks first to “go back and say goodbye” to his family. In a society where one is to “honour their mother and father” (Ex.20:12) and have respect for family, Jesus’ reply seems strange and empty of compassion. What does Jesus mean by “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Have you ever tried to ride a bike straight ahead while looking over your shoulder? When you turn around you find you have drifted across the road.

My first ever date saw me borrowing my parents big old valiant and heading off to the movies. She was going to meet me on Stuart St opposite St Paul’s Cathedral. As I drove up I could see her standing there waiting and I turned to give her a cool wave and a smile. My attention was jolted back to reality with the grinding sound of the parked car I had just sideswiped breaking off its side mirror. I sheepishly left a note for the ladyowner who apparently was practising in the St Paul’s choir. The valiant was fine, my pride was smashed and I didn’t have many more dates with that particular girl. When we get distracted and forget to focus on what’s straight ahead there’s a good likelihood we are going to end up somewhere we never intended.

If you plough a field and you can’t do it straight you are likely to lose your job. Ploughing properly depends on straight lines or you are likely to leave some dirt unturned which is not actually doing the job of a plougher.

Just as one who ploughs a field must stay focused we must focus on the call to discipleship Jesus gives to us. Again, using extreme language Jesus tells the man of this fourth encounter, that to follow him he must leave behind all other attachments. To take his eyes off the road ahead and look back longingly for the old life, will endanger his place in the kingdom. How easy it is to be tossed by the waves and find ourselves desperately wanting to be back on the beach.

Jesus is not saying we must give up our family if we choose to follow him, but he is saying that to follow him is to do so unconditionally. Discipleship is about absolute commitment.

Why follow?

This is a hard sell. Each of these four encounters show us Jesus wants his followers to understand that “following him” will not be easy, peaceful or without waves. Jesus asks for absolute commitment to a journey that will be hard.

Is this what Jesus refers to when he says “take up your cross and follow me?” (Matt 16:24) A cross speaks of death. That is its only purpose. In the first century there was nothing more certain than the outcome of being placed on a cross.

Jesus says to us “my call,” “my way” is death. Death to the old way of living, death to trying to live under the law, death to the passions and desires of the flesh, death to all that binds us up, enslaves us, burying us under waves of fear, pain, loneliness and despair.

Salvation means coming to the cross and allowing Jesus to deal to all our sin. In doing so, we die to the old way of living and take up one with Jesus at its centre. That is what we remember in the sacrament of baptism.

Discipleship means daily taking up our cross and living in a new way, a way not of death but of life, life in restored relationship with God.

So why should we follow Jesus to this death?

The readings from Galatians tell us that following Jesus sets us free and that in following in the way of Christ there is freedom.

Any other way of life is slavery, a yoke just as heavy to carry but without the hope and without direction.

It is important to note that this freedom “is not an opportunity for self-indulgence” (Gal. 5:13) but a freedom to “love one another” and in doing so, we show our love for God and our willingness to uphold his purposes for justice and freedom in the world.

How are we enabled to follow?

This season of Pentecost is about remembering the gift of the Holy Spirit.

To turn and follow Jesus allows the Spirit’s work in our lives. To continue to be filled with the Spirit daily means we are not “bodyboarding” alone. The Holy Spirit is encouraging, guiding, instructing us in the ways of “out the backness” (Gal. 5:25). In asking the Spirit to fill us we are trusting God to help us through all the waves the world throws at us and remain in the freedom only possible through Him.

In obedience we walk, as Jesus did, to the place God instructs us to go to, bearing the Cross, the burden of seeing God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. The way of the Cross is hard, it is not by our strength that we can make it, only by grace and the work of the Spirit in our lives will we get there. We still live in a disoriented world. Sickness, death, turmoil and pain are still very real in the lives of those who follow Christ.

But beyond the Cross we see Easter Sunday, the horizon of the resurrected life, the restoration of Creation to the way it was intended to be. The promise that life will not always be disoriented. Where pain and sorrow, sickness and death will be no more. Where injustice will be banished, and sin’s power will be broken.

In allowing God’s Spirit to continue to fill us and work in and through us there is freedom. The Spirit brings fruit to our lives that is good.

That despite the waves we encounter our lives might still be marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Conclusion:

Working on a farm several summers ago, the farmer asked me to put out some electric fences across paddocks. After my first attempts I looked back at my work to see the fences were anything but straight. Even though I had tried to focus on one point (perhaps a post) on the other side my fences always seemed to snake across, much to the mirth of the farmer.

He taught me that to make the fence straight when you walk you need to keep your eyes ahead just as our earlier plougher had to. But to keep going straight you need to focus on two points of reference. You might focus on a post on the other side of the paddock but to keep walking absolutely straight you need to line that post up with an object beyond it in the distance, like a tree. I discovered that even when a cow was licking your back and nudging you with its nose, if you kept those two points in line you never strayed.

If we are truly committed to following Jesus we must focus first on the way of the cross.

Jesus warns us it won't be an easy journey and not one that is free of life's troubles. It involves us loving as one who would lay down their life for those around them. It involves heading out from the safe beaches we know and fighting the waves that will try to drive us back. It involves placing each day in His care, there are no days off discipleship. And it involves leaving anything that distracts our attention from him behind.

But beyond the cross there is another reference point. Perhaps the point that strengthened Jesus himself. Easter Sunday speaks of resurrection, of the certainty of the restored creation. No matter how weak and frail we feel in the midst of the waves that cast us to and fro, we must fix our eyes beyond the cross, to the day of completion, of Jesus exultant return, when everything will be made new.

Let us keep in step with the Spirit, let us live in the freedom Christ brings us, and let us serve God and neighbour together, and may we all be able to enjoy life "out the back" together.