

Follow...

Matt 4¹⁸⁻²² / 3 John 1⁹⁻¹¹ / Prov 2²⁰

Follow – one of the basics of the Christian life. When God calls us to Himself that call comes in the form of a very simple word - **follow!** I always had a problem following. I remember once going into town with my mother. I would've been, I think, 3 years old and taking the bus into town was a huge deal for me. So much to see, so much to do, so many new things. We went at one stage into a large supermarket, I think Woolworths which was first opened in the main street of Dunedin. I was just marvelous for me – again so much to do and see. So much, in fact, that even though my mother had said to me 'Don't, please, wander off; keep close to me!' I did! I lost track of mum in the wonder of that store and realized 5 minutes later that she was nowhere to be found. I looked all around the shop and decided that she must have gone outside. I wandered down the street for perhaps another 5 minutes and it was not until I turned around and headed back down the street that she found me and, well, we won't mention what happened next. I do remember her asking me, however, this question... 'Why can't you do one simple thing? I asked you to stay with me, to follow me and what happens?' I always thought those sort of questions were ridiculous frankly. She knew what had happened! Why did she have to ask me?

But following is not just a first step – it is, indeed, a major skill. All of life with Christ involves learning to follow as the old song says, more nearly and more dearly. As we grow in Christ our focus remains on Him – on understanding what He would do in every situation; in cherishing the hints and clues we become more adept at gathering as to what Christ is doing and saying and even thinking. And our role is to continue to... follow! So what is it to follow? What does the following skill involve? Following involves imitation. WE are to imitate both Christ and our Christian leaders.

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their

**faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
(Heb 13)**

When I first entered into the Christian life as an adult my main teachers were a young couple who led our youth group. They were newly married but were reasonably mature as Christians and they allowed us as young people to hang out with them. Those were formative days for as I watched carefully how they did life and as I watched I realize that they did many things which I did not do – good things, wise things. One thing in particular was that they demonstrative a wonderful patience with others. This was something I did not do and so I determined to imitate this quality. I was a wonderful lesson for me. The more patient I became – the easier it became to relate to others and to maintain good relationships.

Following is imitation – it is doing exactly as someone else is doing. It is studying what another has done and repeating it in some way. For us today that can be something of a problem. Imitation is considered a little vulgar in our culture where freedom of expression is so highly valued but let' face it, freedom of expression is a bit problematical as well. I mean, if we all expressed ourselves just as we wanted to the world would be kind of weird wouldn't it? But imitation can be a problem too.

A new missionary recruit went to Venezuela for the first time. He was struggling with the language and didn't understand a whole lot of what was going on. Intending to visit one of the local churches, he got lost, but eventually got back on track and found the place. Having arrived late, the church was already packed. The only pew left was the one on the front row. So as not to make a fool of himself, he decided to pick someone out of the crowd to imitate. He chose to follow the man sitting next to him on the front pew. As they sang, the man clapped his hands, so the missionary recruit clapped too. When the man stood up to pray, the missionary recruit stood up too. When the man sat down, he sat down. When the man held the cup and bread for the Lord's Supper, he held the cup and bread. During the preaching, the recruit didn't understand a thing. He just sat there and tried to look just like that man in the front pew. Then he

perceived that the preacher was giving announcements. People clapped, so he looked to see if the man was clapping. He was, and so the recruit clapped too. Then the preacher said some words that he didn't understand and he saw the man next to him stand up. So he stood up too. Suddenly a hush fell over the entire congregation. A few people gasped. He looked around and saw that nobody else was standing. So he sat down. After the service ended, the preacher stood at the door shaking the hands of those who were leaving. When the missionary recruit stretched out his hand to greet the preacher, the preacher said, in English: "I take it you don't speak Spanish." The missionary recruit replied: "No, I don't. Is it that obvious?" "Well, yes," said the preacher, "I announced that the Acosta family had a new-born baby boy and would the proud father please stand up."

So the issue here is not **that** we imitate but **who** we imitate. Imitation is not vulgar or wrong when we imitate one who is leading us to a place we want to go. Imitation is not a cop out when we achieve through imitation a kingdom goal – a goal that is worthy of Christ and which edifies those around us. Imitation towards these ends is a noble and worthy thing and, indeed, wise. The book of proverbs reiterates this approach again and again.

**²⁰ Therefore walk in the way of the good,
and keep to the paths of the just. (Prov 2²⁰)**

**²⁰ I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice, (Prov 8²⁰)**

**⁶ Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight." (Prov 9⁶)**

**²⁶ Those who trust in their own wits are fools;
but those who walk in wisdom come through safely. (Prov 28²⁶)**

To follow means to imitate but it also means to move – to go somewhere – to act. Jesus says in response to his story about the house built on the sand...

**²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not
act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on
sand. (Matt 7)**

Jesus calls us to act as a means of following him. We can't fish for people in front of the TV. We can't keep Jesus in sight by staying put and we can't serve by sitting on our butts. We do need to act but the key to that action is a clear view of the person of Jesus. The act of following presumes that we have been given a lead by Jesus. It presumes that we are doing something because we suspect Christ is in the doing of it. What we find, however, is that the action Jesus calls us into is by its nature the very opposite of the action we would naturally want to be involved in.

Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, told the following story about the difference Jesus makes to our action. I know a man, says Vanier, who lives in Paris. His wife has Alzheimer's. He was once an important businessman—his life filled with busyness. But he said that when his wife fell sick, "I just couldn't put her into an institution, so I kept her. I fed her. I bathed her." Vanier went to Paris to visit them, and this businessman who had been very busy all his life said, "I have changed. I have become more human." I got a letter from him recently. He said that in the middle of the night his wife woke him up. She came out of the fog of Alzheimer's for a moment, and she said, "Darling, I just want to say thank you for all you've doing for me." Then she fell back into the fog. He told me, "I wept and I wept." Sometimes, says Vanier, Christ calls us to love people who cannot love us in return. They live in the fog of mental illness, disabilities, poverty, or spiritual blindness. As we serve them, we may only receive fleeting glimpses of gratitude. But just as Jesus has loved us in the midst of our spiritual confusion, so we continue to love others as they walk through a deep fog.

This, friends, is the action of following Jesus – the One who loves us in our fog. This is the action of going where Christ goes, of being where Christ would be. This action makes us more human and more compassionate and more patient. This action isn't the impatient act of someone with no time to waste on those around them. This is the action of the God who loves us.

A third aspect of following Christ is that it will always involve leaving something behind. The notion that we can have it all is not only a complete fallacy it is, in

fact, quite destructive of faith. Jesus' call to each of us will involve giving something up and, indeed, embarking on a lifelong path of making choices to do some things and not to do others. When Christ calls us to follow there is **always, always, always** an implied call **away** from something else. We cannot follow God and serve mammon. We cannot follow God and gain the world. We cannot follow God and do just what we want. G K Chesterton once said,

"To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it."

Eugene Peterson shares a story about a completely unchurched young woman who started attending his church and made a genuine commitment to follow Jesus. In the ensuing months she presented herself for baptism and started growing as a disciple, studying Scripture, and attending worship—"embracing everything readily and gladly." But there was one thing that puzzled Peterson: the young woman continued to live with her boyfriend (as she had done for years), and she was uninterested in marriage. Then Peterson shared the rest of the story: She told me all this without apology and not as a confession but quite casually, as we were getting acquainted with one another. I wondered if I should say anything. Surely she knew that the Christian way had some sexual implications for the way you lived. She was in church each Sunday I assumed that she would eventually notice. I waited for her to bring up the subject. One day on impulse I said, "We have been having these conversations for seven months. Astrid, would you do something for me?" "Sure. What is it?" "Live celibate for the next six months." Surprised, she said, "Why would I do that?" ".... Trust me. I think it's important." I learned later that her boyfriend moved out before the week was over. A month later when she came to see me, she didn't mention it. But the following month she brought it up: "When you asked me to live celibate for six months, I had no idea what you were up to. You asked me to trust you, and so I did. It's been two months now, and I think I understand what you were doing. I feel so free; I've never felt so 'myself' before, never felt so at home with myself. I thought everybody did what I was doing—all my friends did. I just thought this was the American way. And now I am noticing so many other things about my relations with others—they seem so much more clean and whole. So uncluttered.

And do you know what? I have been thinking that I might want to get married someday. Thank you." The celibacy decision survived the six-month mark and continued for two more years, at which time she and her fiancé exchanged vows, and I blessed their Christian marriage.

By any standards this has to be the hardest skill in following. What we head **towards** is usually inspiring; it usually involves at the very least our curiosity and if it's a person we have at least the hope of fellowship – of company on the way. But the other half of following is always this leaving behind of the familiar, the history, the memories. But following must involve goodbyes. It must involve leaving some things behind and about the only people who are really being trained to do this these days are addicts because with addicts it's obvious that they have to leave something behind. In many ways they are ahead of we who don't have quite do obvious addictions. They lead the way because have to learn the art of leaving something behind just in order to survive. We who don't have to learn to leave mostly falter in our following because we simply stop. There are many things which don't make the addiction label which we in the West allow to completely mess up our following of Christ. From money, to comfort to security to poisonous relationships to TV, to sex and even, dare I say, to religion. Some people are so inured to their religious habit that Jesus can't get a word in edge wise. To follow means to part with some things we just love and we will have to face that eventually.

Learning to follow is one of the fundamental arts of the Christian life. Follow Jesus. It will mean you leave behind some things but the life you receive will more than make up for anything you leave behind.