

Follow Me 2

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Matt 14²²⁻³⁶ / Is 26¹⁻⁸

How do we follow Christ? What are the skills required to become a follower of Jesus. Indeed, what skills are required to be a follower at all. The fundamental dynamic of the Christian life is wrapped up in this call of Jesus to His original disciples. But what's it all about? How do we follow Christ today and can we learn anything from how they followed Him then?

Following is an interesting phenomenon. Have you ever watched anyone try to get a dog to follow? It begins usually well. The dog is keen and the owner is keen. One thing you notice quite consistently however is that the dog is generally keener. Dogs like to walk, in general, faster than their owners and before long the dog is straining, the leash is straining and the owner is straining and the whole exercise appears to be, in short, a strain! The dog often ends up making this half choked sound as it desperately pulls its owner along and despite repeated calls and tugs on the leash the dog just wants to go and the owner just doesn't. Of course there are some novel solutions to this...

Now before I go on I do want to apologise to you dog owners whose dog behaves itself while out walking and, of course, at all other times. Some dogs do have better owners and I know that all you here who own dogs will be of that variety. But the point here really is, how like dogs we are when it comes to following Jesus. Our 'followership' is really just an excuse to follow our own nose – to do our own thing and if the person on the end of the leash struggles to keep up... well, tough luck. We tend to drag Jesus where we want to go! And my experience is that Jesus often lets us go there. [Story re going north for forestry. Fran not happy – but I put that down to her lack of adventure. Parents not that keen – but I put that down to their natural wariness of anything new. My minister not that impressed – but what did he know about forestry! Within days of getting there I knew I was in for a hard time and so began 2 months of regret. So what does following Jesus involve? Let's have a closer look at our scripture from this morning.

1. Following Jesus stretches first of all our recognition of who He is. If we're going to follow someone we surely must recognise that person we must know whom it is we are following. Now you'd think that those who had followed Jesus from the beginning would have little trouble with this but this is not the case. We have at least three different occasions when those closest to Jesus did not recognise Him. This occasion is the first. Then on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus is changed in front of three of the disciples the implication is that had they not witnessed the change they would have struggled to recognise Him. Then again after His resurrection His own disciples and some of the women with them fail to

recognise Him. So the question must be asked of us – do we recognise Christ’s voice and Christ’s appearance before us? Are we attuned to His leading because if we are not we cannot follow.

We get so familiar with the biblical Jesus we think we will surely recognise His voice and His call to us. I think the opposite is true. I think we are fundamentally handicapped when it comes to recognising Jesus and we see this in His earthly ministry time and again. It is the testimony of John that the bulk of His own people did not recognise Him. John’s words are...
“¹⁰**He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognise Him.** ¹¹**He came to that which was His own but His own did not receive Him.**” He was, as the great chorus from Handel’s ‘Messiah’ cries out – ‘**despised and rejected.**’ And this leads us to only one conclusion.

If His own struggled to recognise Him we too, who are grafted into the vine and are of wild stock, who are, essentially foreigners to the grace of God, will struggle to identify Jesus. And this means we will have to work at it. It’s one thing to read the Bible and to become familiar with the biblical Jesus. It’s quite another to know Him and to hear Him call us to a specific obedience in a specific way. Isn’t it interesting that obedience is never difficult till it becomes **specific**. Be a good boy is never as hard as ‘make your bed and clean this room before you do anything else!’ We strain against the specific – we rationalise ourselves out of the specific. Oh, I don’t mind following Jesus so long as He doesn’t interfere too much in my life so long as He doesn’t get too specific!

So how do we recognise the person of Christ in our lives? How do we discover His voice? One clue comes to us from the way we develop our early recognition of who our parents are. Psychologists call this very early means of recognition ‘imprinting’ and it happens as a means of bonding the very young infant to a parent who will care for them. The key to this dynamic is early and sustained contact during the period when the imprinting occurs. Where this occurs the infant will recognise their parent from then on and be ready to make demands on that particular adult when it needs to. But this is reinforced later on simply by familiarity. When we make the voice of Christ familiar we get better at recognising His voice. And we do this by staying close to Him – by allowing Him to direct our paths – by making time for Him – by giving Him our time. Our problem is, we have so many other priorities there is usually simply no time to grow familiar with Jesus. Our problem is one of **distraction...**

If we could sum up the key issue in most people’s walk with Christ it would be, I think, this one. **We get distracted!** We have our minds and our hearts elsewhere. We are not thinking of, nor expecting, not perhaps even wanting Jesus around when He is. Our unspoken assumption in most instances is that if God wants our attention He is quite capable of getting it!! Why become a ‘**god-botherer?**’ This was certainly the case with Jesus walking on water. Who would expect Him to do a thing like that? The storm is threatening, they’re exhausted and this ghost arrives to torment them. Of course they don’t recognise Jesus. And

the same applies to His appearances after the resurrection. Mary doesn't recognise Him until He says her name. The disciples on the road to Emmaus don't recognise Him until He blessed the meal and those out fishing don't recognise Him until John points it out. They are all distracted, all not expecting Jesus. And we too, must learn to expect Jesus in the unexpected places of our lives if we are to recognise Him and follow Him. Because He is there...

He is there in the confusion and in the certainty – not behind each but simply with them. He is there in the joy and in the sadness. He is there in the success and the failure and He is there in the glory and in the pain. God is there. Have we perceived Him today? God is with us! Have we determined to be with Him. But how Richard? How do we begin to perceive Him? How do we know that it is Him?

1. Jesus will identify Himself – 'It is me, don't be afraid!' We need not have fear that our lack of recognition is a barrier to God. If we doubt we can ask God to confirm that it is Him. This is not lack of faith but simple honesty. God will identify Himself.
2. He will call us. 'Step out of the boat Peter.' Jesus identifies Himself in order to call us to Himself. A call is not primarily about achieving something but about being with God. When Jesus calls us to action it is so that we might draw closer to God who is already in action. The question for us is, do we want to draw near to God?
3. He will console us. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Christ comes not to criticise, belittle or berate but to console and comfort. Jesus takes our fears and bitterness's and brings relief even when situations spiral out of our control and result in events which we would rather not have occurred. I suspect if you identify God as one who is constantly or severely critical in your life then you have wrongly identified Jesus. Even to those caught in sin Jesus was only mildly critical. He saved His severest censure for those who were convinced they were right and were critical of everyone else. And if you are like this, then perhaps you will taste God's reproach.

Robert Louis Stevenson tells of a storm that caught a vessel off a rocky coast and threatened to drive it and its passengers to destruction. In the midst of the terror, one daring man, contrary to orders, went to the deck, made a dangerous passage to the pilot house and saw the steerman, lashed fast at his post of holding the wheel unwaveringly, and inch by inch, turning the ship out, once more, to sea. The pilot saw the watcher and smiled. Then, the daring passenger went below and gave out a note of cheer: "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."

We all need to see the face of our pilot and Jesus is only too happy to let us draw close enough to see him. But will we risk the journey. Will we face the raging storm in order to follow Him?