

Matthew 4, 12-23; 1 Corinthians 1, 10-18

Those of you who have ever tried to follow someone will know how difficult it can be. You don't have to look far in Oxford to see straggling parties of tourists failing to keep up with their leader - the person in front frantically waving an umbrella or clipboard. I've been on group tours and I know how easy it is to get distracted, to stop for a moment to look at something, or exchange a few words with a fellow-traveller, only to look up and find that the pink-spotted umbrella you were supposed to be following is nowhere in sight. It's at such moments that you need to stop, think and work out where exactly you were headed in the hope that you can join the party again before anyone notices you're missing!

The Gospel account of Jesus's ministry suggests there are times where physically following Jesus was challenging – walking on water comes to mind! However, that's not the only, or indeed, the main challenge the disciples and the early church faced. It's not the only challenge we, as Christians, face. I think we too struggle with the questions and issues Peter raised in the dialogue we heard and share his incredulity that what is being asked of us is to be "like Jesus". I suspect for all of us there are times when we are "off-track" or "missing", times indeed when we are thoroughly lost and need help getting back on to the way Jesus wants us to follow.

"Just come with me", Jesus says, "don't worry about your past, your possessions, your companions. Just trust and step forward into a journey with me." So much easier said than done, as the disciples were to discover, as some of them did indeed follow Jesus literally all the way to the cross. Even without that threat hanging over us, it's hard to follow Jesus, hard to keep on the right track, as the questions posed in the last hymn we sang make all too clear.

Jesus, however, doesn't ever really suggest it will be easy. Looking again at our reading from Matthew, we see it all starts when John the Baptist is thrown into prison – proclaiming and following a new way is a dangerous business in First Century Palestine and both Jesus the disciples would have known that.

It was dangerous too for the early Christians, who faced both ridicule and punishment for their beliefs. We may not be in danger of imprisonment for following Jesus but the risk of ridicule and, maybe worse, of being seen as irrelevant, is very much present today, as the message of the cross is indeed seen as "sheer folly" by many in our society and Christian values are

increasingly side-lined in most debate. Jesus was challenged throughout his ministry and maybe we shouldn't be surprised that his way continues to be challenged today. Just because something isn't popular does not mean it isn't right!

Jesus knows too that even those who choose to follow him start from a far from perfect position and he makes it clear that following him will require them to change their ways and their focus. "Repent", Jesus says "for the kingdom of God is upon you". It's time to stop waiting and talking and to do something! It's time to live your life with God's values of mercy, justice, peace and love as your guide. It's time to stop putting yourself first.

All of us, I suspect, hear those words in the knowledge that we have a long way to go if we're to live up to Jesus' vision for his followers. It's reassuring therefore that Jesus chose as his disciples ordinary people with faults and limitations and he called them to follow him, just as they were. With his help and the power of the Spirit, they became extraordinary leaders, whose influence extended far beyond the boundaries of the world they knew and is still felt 2000 years later. What each of us currently is, is, I believe, never the full potential of what, if we choose to go with Jesus, we can be.

In Jesus's call to action, I find myself hearing not only a personal call to change and really follow him but also a very current call to corporate action for the church, for Jesus' followers in the world today – the call to do something about the big challenges – challenges like climate change, poverty and injustice. They are daunting challenges but so were the challenges facing an occupied people and, if we do indeed follow Jesus, the church and its members do have the capacity to make a difference and the power to bring about real change.

I want to highlight one more challenge from our Gospel reading – the challenge to be evangelists, bringing others to follow too. Jesus tells his disciples that he will make them "fishers of men". I must admit at this point that I have never found that particular imagery at all appealing. Ever since I sang it repeatedly in a Chorus at Sunday School, it has conjured for me pictures of people enmeshed and trapped, trying to escape. I don't like the image and I've never found it easy to spread the news of Jesus beyond the boundaries of Church - the idea of going out and catching people for Jesus is very scary.

In considering the imagery used, we do need to remember that those who heard that call were fishermen, people whose very survival depended on

catching fish, who could find in the abundance of the seas all they needed. A net cast into the sea doesn't discriminate in what it catches and this movement which Jesus was starting would welcome people of all kinds, from all backgrounds, all genders, all abilities.

Fishermen would have strived to catch as much as they could for their own survival and surely we, as God's church today, should be seeking to make it a place which thrives, and grows, a place where all are welcomed, all valued, all celebrated for their difference and all working together for one outcome – the fulfilment of God's laws and ways here on earth. If fishing for people means bringing the world together in that way, it remains a tremendous challenge but it's also a vision worth working for!

We know from Paul's letters that the church does grow quickly but it also struggles to live up to this wonderful vision of its future. The passage we heard from 1 Corinthians makes it clear that already there are quarrels, already there are differences of opinion, already there are factions appearing, driven by loyalty to one leader or another.

I started this sermon with an imagined scenario where each of us is part of a tour group following a leader holding aloft a pink-spotted umbrella. I want to take that one step further and to envisage a moment where you realise that the pink-spotted umbrella you have been diligently following is held, not by your tour leader, but by a complete stranger heading in quite a different direction.

It's a horrible feeling knowing that you've been following the wrong leader but in some many ways we do that all the time, following popular opinion or a majority view rather than Jesus; pursuing wealth or personal comfort rather than knowing more of God's kingdom; putting work first and Jesus second, or third or fourth...

At a time when we mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, we are all too aware of what impact a bad leader can have and of the importance of learning from the past, and of ensuring our lives are governed by Jesus and we have not been tempted to follow another way. Let's keep our focus on what is good and not put effort into gaining prizes which turn out to be worth little or nothing after all. Following Jesus will always lead us to treasure, but maybe not of the kind we are envisaging.

Christian worshippers in first Century Corinth were confused about who they were following and needed to be reminded that it was Jesus to whom they all held allegiance, Jesus who had been crucified for them and Jesus who could lead them on the way to salvation. Let's hear those words of Paul as a challenge to us to make sure that we too are following the one true leader, allowing him to lead us to salvation and our world ever closer to the kingdom values he represents.

Let's make sure too that we're not afraid to follow Jesus openly and to be identified clearly as one of his followers. Only in that way, will those outside the church with whom we come into contact be able to see what the power of God can do. Who knows, they may even choose to tag along, bringing their own skills and gifts to contribute to the work of building the kingdom here and now. The church isn't perfect, it doesn't have huge current influence, but neither did the disciples and look what they achieved when they obeyed Jesus' call and followed in his footsteps! Who knows what will happen if we do the same!

We end with a prayer - Lamb of God, we come to thank you for the miracle of your forgiving, saving, limitless love, we thank you too that, however much of a mess we and our world are in, you never give up on us, you never leave us without hope and you never waver from your vision of a kingdom of love for all. As we come to you, we ask you to come to us, filling the dark places with light, transforming conflict to peace; injustice to justice; and despair to joy. Come to our world leaders, helping them to rule wisely. Challenge them when they are tempted to go the wrong way and help them to choose the right way.

Come to your church – help us to be the voice of love, peace, mercy and justice, sharing your guidance and your way in our world. Come into the situations we hear or read about in the news and into the situations which are never reported, where need may be just as great. Come into our town, our places of work, our church, our families and remind us again what love can do. Come to all those known to us who are suffering at this time – and name them before you now in the silence. Finally, come to us, transform our lack of courage, our worries, our sadness.

In every place, your love can change everything!
Let us go out into the world, more determined to choose your way and ready to show everyone we meet that we are followers of you
Amen.