

Following Jesus: The Training Takes a Dangerous Turn

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B — 2 June 2024

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1 Samuel 3.1-10; Psalm 139.1-6, 13-18; 2Corinthians 4.5-12; Mark 2.23-3.6

INTRODUCTION

A student took me aside as we left the lecture hall. “Sir, may some of us come and speak with you?” I made an appointment and thought no more.

A few days later half a dozen students turned up in my tiny office, we drank tea and got down to business. Now in some cultures business can take a long time. They told me stories, made no accusations nor named anyone. By the end I was well aware of their message.

They are watching you.

“They” was the state security branch. State security had planted students in the college, some of whom would go on to be ordained in various denominations. The reason was that we had students from all different countries, some of whom were considered Marxist and radical.

Some of the staff were introducing students to Latin American liberation theology. It had become a specialisation of mine. The radical call to make the poor central in Gospel proclamation provoked fear in one party states.

The “they” was led by the Attorney-General who later said to me “I know everything you say and do”.

It was chilling.

Mark records “They watched him to see if...”.

BEING A FOLLOWER: OUR CALLING

Throughout the rest of the liturgical year Mark will be our guide. Jesus will be the central figure but following Jesus will be the consequent theme. This earliest Gospel tells a story that explores what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Mark gives us story and symbol, and the teaching is embedded in the story. He never says here is a tick box list of a follower's characteristics. He says, here is a story; now what do you make of that?

Stories have levels of meaning, they create symbols, metaphors, poetry and possibilities far more than commands. So, they are annoying to many people. I hope they are not to you.

Early in his ministry in Galilee, before the events we recall today, Jesus called followers. Just a reminder. He went about his home area and the lake and commanded people to follow him. Of course, they could refuse, and we find some would, but some followed.

The beautiful story of Samuel's call reminds us of the prophetic nature of this vocation. It not an invitation to join a club but a call to bear a prophetic word that would bring joy and pain, peace and anger.

God calls Samuel when Samuel does not even know him. Eli's advice is the key to all following; “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

That has been the metaphor of Christian life and spirituality for followers ever since. The Lord stood there, and Samuel listened.

Here is our beginning point.

BEING A FOLLOWER: BE PREPARED FOR SURPRISE

Having a sabbath day walk in a field of grain may seem strange to us, but not then. They pick at the heads of grain and rub it in their hands. Notice they were accused of not of stealing or trespass but sabbath breaking.

Sabbath was an identity marker. Circumcision was an individual identity marker. Sabbath was a social marker of identity. It was also part of the boundary that kept others at bay. Anglican is one such for us, both identity and boundary marker.

The Pharisees were not more evil or devious than anyone else. They believed that God wanted the people to be holy so the Messiah would come and rule. Sabbath was part of that identity and boundary of holiness. They were the guardians of that identity and boundary.

Here was a man publicly breaking the identity and the boundary. Further, he justifies it on what they see as the dubious ground of “need”, overriding the law. And that based on what they might have seen as a somewhat dubious argument from a story about David in 1 Samuel.

Jesus turns upside down everything the followers and the Pharisees believed up to that point. And he does it on the grounds that the Son of Man has authority to do this.

He has named himself thus once before in this short tale when he heals a paralytic and forgives sins. This title from the book of Daniel is one of huge authority of the Almighty himself.

It is outrageous. The followers are exposed to the reality of what is happening. This is not some petty bandit or, as we shall see his family thought, a nut case.

He claims the whole and the identity of Israel be reduced to this dictum: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”

Human creations, like the myriad of laws that surrounded the sabbath, had become weapons to control the population. There were two reasons given in the OT for the sabbath; to rest and remember the liberation from slavery, and then to rest and be like God enjoying his creation. Jesus draws on those reasons to reject control.

That is what it means for the sabbath to be holy.

BEING A FOLLOWER: ANOTHER SURPRISE

The watching begins. It is easy to see why. Jesus seems to have planted a stick of dynamite in their edifice of control and identity.

Sabbath again and once again in a synagogue. The last time he taught and confronted evil spirits, overcoming them. The people raised the question, “by what authority?” That question is the most dangerous question that might be raised at least for the Pharisees, and the now appearing shadow political group, the Herodians. After all, the law and the power of Herod Antipas are true authority. There is no need of any other.

But the watchers and the followers are about to learn something new. A man is restored whole from a non-life-threatening disability. The great restoration for the creation is exemplified in this unnamed man. That is, according to Jesus, a sabbath activity. Why wait? The time has come. The liberation of creation has begun. It begins on a sabbath because sabbath celebrates creation and liberation.

Instead of joy he meets hardness of heart, even more, the desire to murder and eradicate him. Joy and liberation are met with the religion of politics of control and hardness, the religion and politics of death.

BEING A FOLLOWER: CONSEQUENCES

I have spoken at some length about these stories because they are critical for discipleship and they have consequences for followers. They are also critical tools in our kitbag for checking ourselves.

Paul today tells of his experience of the consequences. He is a man in whose life Christ lives, in death and resurrection. He bears in his life the light of God's glory in Christ which is the joy and liberation of the created order.

He knows he is a clay jar easily brought low in affliction, crushing blows, perplexity and persecution. But this clay jar even in its vulnerability is where he makes visible the life of Jesus, the recreated life of resurrection.

That is us. That is what it means to be a follower of the One who took his disciples on a journey through a cornfield and worked restoration and life in a synagogue even though it wasn't needful by political and legal standards.

Jesus calls us. He takes us on two small adventures that turn out to have possible alarming consequences. That is our life.

The life of Jesus made visible in us is our guide. Not rules. Not imitation. Living the life of Jesus through our clay jars.

Amen.