



Following Where Jesus Leads Us

Reading: 1 Peter 2: 11-25

For the past two Sundays we have asked a question of fundamental importance for our Christian community: what is the DNA of our church? When we unpeel all of our activities and ministries, our day-to-day involvement in a multitude of meetings and tasks, at heart what is it that we exist for, that makes us what we are? And our answer has been very simple and yet at the same time extraordinarily profound. What is the DNA of our church? – it is 100% Jesus.

Now today I am going to ask this question a third time. There is good precedent for this. Did not Jesus himself, when renewing his call to Peter, ask him three times, “Do you love me?.” The gospel account tells us that Peter was grieved when Jesus asked him this the third time. Well I hope you are not going to be too grieved with me this morning.

Over the last two weeks we have reminded you of two things in particular that should define us as a people.

Firstly we should receive all that Jesus offers us. We do not primarily come offering ourselves to God, as if we have qualities and attributes that would help Him establish His kingdom, generously making our contribution available for Him to use. Firstly and primarily we come to receive from Jesus. We receive new birth into God’s family, protection by God’s great power, a wonderful inheritance prepared for us in heaven, and a down payment of that inheritance in the form of the Holy Spirit to encourage us and guide us.

Secondly we should allow Jesus to change us. Our Lord was the one who himself said, “*I have not come to get the righteous to follow me. I have come to get sinners to turn away from their sins.*” (Luke 5: 32). It must be part of our DNA that we invite and allow Jesus to change us into those who increasingly reflect his character.

This week I want talk about a third aspect of our DNA. We should follow Jesus wherever he leads us. In our Bible passage this morning we read the words, “*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps*” (1 Peter 2: 21 NIV-UK). Now in reminding us of our commitment to follow Jesus Peter has a particular context in mind; he writes to those who are living as foreigners and exiles in an ungodly society (v11). John told us, “*As he [Jesus] is, so are we in this world*” (1 John 4: 17). Jesus, in praying to his Father about his followers, said, “*They are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*” (John 17: 14-18 NIV-UK). As God’s children, as citizens of His kingdom, we are foreigners in a society we do not, at heart, belong to. But we are not just wandering aimlessly, as those lost and without purpose. We have a mandate; we have a mission from the master who has gone before us. He said, “*Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” (Matt 28: 19 NIV-UK). In our interactions in society, our involvement in the community, our relationship to authority, our reaching out to the needy, indeed in everything we do, we follow the leading and guiding of our head, who is Jesus.

“Follow me,” was a phrase that Jesus used time and time again. “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men.” Many years ago we used to sing choruses echoing these words.

*Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus,
Anywhere, everywhere, I will follow on.
Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus,
Everywhere he leads me I will follow on.*

*I have decided to follow Jesus.
I have decided to follow Jesus.
I have decided to follow Jesus.
No turning back, no turning back.*

When we teach everything Jesus has commanded us then we are inevitably going to rub up against the culture in which we live as foreigners and strangers. In the very same prayer that I have just quoted from Jesus said, “*I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world*” (John 17: 14 NIV-UK). Brothers and sisters, if we have not experienced much of the hatred of the world then it is only because, for a time, we in this privileged land have been living in the calm at the centre of the storm. But be sure the storm will be coming our way if this nation continues to turn away from God and if we continue to faithfully proclaim His word. In some of his last words to his disciples Jesus said, “*Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.*” (Matt 24: 9-10 NIV-UK). We will teach, as did Jesus and the apostles, that people must repent of their sins, and they will say we are being judgemental and intolerant. We will preach as Peter did that there is no other name but Jesus by which we must be saved, and we will stand accused of promoting division. In the eyes of an increasingly vocal and influential group of activists we will be seen as bigots for teaching the divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Bible. It will not be possible to be faithful to Christ and his teaching without experiencing increasingly hostile opposition from those that hate the very DNA we have been speaking about – that we should be 100% for Jesus.

What does Peter advise God’s people to do, in the light of the world’s hostility?

First of all, focus fully on all that Christ has accomplished for us through his suffering and death.

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’ (1 Peter 2: 23-24 NIV-UK)

He has walked the path before us. He suffered rejection, hatred and death, but God in His amazing wisdom and grace used that very rejection and death to open the way for all who believe in him to be freed from the power of sin and receive everlasting life. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said, “*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*” (Heb 12: 3 NIV-UK).

Secondly, determine to live lives of such exemplary goodness that those who accuse you of bigotry and intolerance will be forced to acknowledge your righteousness, and indeed will one day give glory to God for your life and behaviour.

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2: 12 NIV-UK)

What does this mean? Well, Peter says be submissive, don’t retaliate, don’t think that by protesting or arguing you will justify your position or be vindicated. Instead let your good deeds speak for you. God will use your good deeds and righteous behaviour to silence the critics in His time. It is not your arguments that will convince the opposition but your behaviour and lifestyle. And it goes almost without saying, therefore, that we should NOT be prejudiced, critical, intolerant or judgemental. Instead we must daily seek grace from the Lord to enable us to reach out to others with unconditional love, whilst at the same time sharing with them the power of Christ to set them free from all that causes them to fall short of God’s wonderful plan for their life.

I am reminded of the gospel story of the rich young ruler who approached Jesus seeking assurance of eternal life. Mark tells us that Jesus, looking at this young man, loved him. Jesus told him to go and sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Jesus. But the story ends sadly, with the young man leaving unhappily, not heeding Jesus’ words, because he was very wealthy (Mark 10: 17-22). See how Jesus identified what really mattered to this young man and held him in bondage. I wonder how you or I would have reacted if we were present for this encounter. Mark’s description seems to suggest that the disciples were a bit nonplussed. To help understand some of their reaction, suppose it happened today in this service. I give an appeal, asking is there’s anyone who here who wants to be sure that they have eternal life. To our surprise someone gets up and walks forward. And it’s someone we all recognise, who doesn’t normally attend church. It’s one of the richest business men in Scotland. Then I go forward to meet him, and pray with him for a short while. And then I say something that causes consternation. “God has made it clear to me that what is holding you back from following Jesus is all of your wealth. Go and sell your shares in all your businesses, give the money to the poor, and come back to this church. We will help you to start following Jesus.” The rich business man is taken aback. He stammers, “I can’t do that. It’s out of the question.” Then he runs from the church in distress. What would people say? Quite a few things I imagine, involving words and phrases such as prejudice, intolerance, and lack of balance, and a few murmurs about the difference he could have made to the church finances!

Well that hasn’t happened to us, and probably never will. But Jesus never, ever pretended that following him would be easy. In fact were it not for the fact that we are born again by God’s Spirit, and strengthened with His power day by day none of us would last the course. Jesus said, “*Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14: 27 NIV-UK). And again he said, “*Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples*” (Luke 14: 33 NIV-UK).

I am reminded of the words of the missionary Jim Elliott, who wrote in his diary entry for 28 Oct 1949, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” Jim and his four companions were martyred on 8 January 1956 as they attempted to bring the good news of Jesus to the Huaorani people in the Ecuadorian jungle. You will find the story in the book written by Jim’s wife, Elizabeth, “Through Gates of Splendour.” If you haven’t read it I warmly recommend it to you.

The Bible passage we read this morning finishes with this verse: “*For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*” (1 Peter 2: 25 NIV-UK). I am told that in the land of Israel shepherds do not drive their flocks from the rear, but lead them from the front. Jesus used this analogy to describe his relationship with his own disciples.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger’s voice. (John 10: 2-5 NIV-UK)

If I were telling this as a children’s story I would describe Woolly the lamb, who had only recently joined the flock, and wasn’t yet used to the shepherd’s voice. One day he found a wonderful patch of juicy grass in a little gully behind a rock, and was so content munching away there in the warm sunshine that he completely lost track of time. But then when he came out from behind the rock the shepherd and the rest of the flock had moved on, and he was left behind. The story continues with the shepherd leaving the rest of the flock in their sheep pen and searching the hills until he finds Woolly and brings him safe home. From then on Woolly hardly ever moves from a place where he can see every movement of the shepherd and can immediately follow close behind whenever the shepherd leads the flock on to another pasture.

The point of the story is this. Woolly was doing nothing wrong by enjoying the grass that he found. The problem was that something quite legitimate occupied his attention so much that he took his eyes off the shepherd, and consequently went astray. It is often the legitimate, acceptable things that cause us to take our eyes off Jesus. Whatever it is that keeps us from following wherever he leads us, that thing we must be prepared to lay aside in order to be fully committed to walking with him. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said:

Therefore, ... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus. (Heb 12: 1-2 NIV-UK)

This, I pray, is and will continue to be a significant strand of the DNA of our church.