

Sunday 3rd September 2023.

Followers of the Way – The way to be a disciple.

‘Be a life-long learner’ – Tom Yacomeni

Matthew 11v25-30

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

²⁷ “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I wonder how you are feeling as we start this new term together? I hope you managed to get some rest over the summer – I have certainly appreciated some down time over the last couple of weeks and a chance to wait on the Lord and do some thinking. I have been able to thank God for what he has done over the past year and to thank God for all of you, his family of All Saints growing here together. It feels like God has been preparing us for a new season and although there have been challenges at times which have forced us to our knees to pray, we are surely making progress, one step at a time. It reminds me of the verse from Isaiah 40 quoted at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s gospel:

‘In the wilderness prepare the Way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’

I wonder what mountains and valleys you face as we begin this term? Where is God calling you to venture with him? I know some of you are facing really tough circumstances: Health issues; family difficulties and financial challenges. As the first words of the best seller 'the Road less travelled' puts it: Life is difficult.' So we need to pray for God's help for the journey. But there are also new opportunities for growth, grace and joy. What new great exploits has he planned for us as a church? Well God is faithful and our job is to prepare the way. The Holy Spirit does the heavy lifting – our place is to trace out the narrow way by faith and to place one foot in front of the other taking daily footsteps in the company of Christ.

In fact, years before Christianity was even called Christianity, followers of Jesus were called *followers of the Way*.

The word for the Way is the Greek word *Hodos*. It is mentioned over a hundred times in the New testament and every reference was powerful for the early believers.

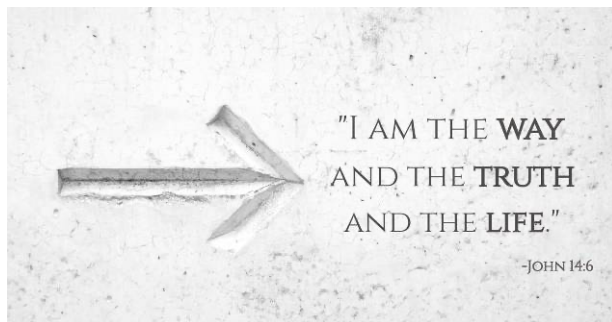
hodos

When the opening verses of the earliest Gospel Mark say 'prepare the Way for the Lord' some translators have capitalised THE WAY, because for early believers that was their identity.

Last term we studied the Israelite's journey to the promised land and the Exodus – God's great rescue of the Hebrews from their captivity in Egypt. Our word Exodus is formed from the Greek *Ex* and *Hodos* - literally the way [Hodos] out [Ex].

Yet Jesus came proclaiming a new way out. Not from the physical captivity, but from the deeper captivity of sin. The Godless thoughts and actions which keep our souls locked out of communion with God.

And what did he say? *I am the Way, the truth, and the life.*



So the earliest followers of Jesus called themselves followers of the way, and the writer to the Hebrews wrote that his body given for us has opened for us 'a new and living way' into the Holy of Holies.

So our sermon series this term is based on this really helpful book by Simon Reed called 'Followers of the way'. I met Simon several years ago after hearing about his work with the Community of St. Aidan and St. Hilda, which is a dispersed community of people who seek to follow the way of Jesus and learn daily discipleship from the Celtic tradition of monastic prayers, mission and hospitality.

In the opening Chapters to the book Simon writes that it is *discipleship* that is the most strategic issue facing the western church today. In the face of declining church attendance and Christianity's struggle to maintain credibility in the public sphere, it is only by narrowing the gap between our daily lived experience and the new life that Christ offers us that we will truly be able to demonstrate God's transforming power to the world around us. Laurence Singlehurst, former director of YWAM Youth with a Mission wrote: 'Discipleship is on everyone's agenda. Denominations and churches realise that in today's culture, who we are speaks a great deal louder than what we say.'

Simon writes 'The problem is this: so many of us have been told that we are, or ought to be, disciples of Jesus, but no one seems able to tell us exactly what that means or how to do it in a sustainable way that connects with all the stuff going on in our lives, not just the church bits. The consequences are huge. If we believe that God should somehow make a positive difference to every part of our lives and that does not seem to be happening, we live with disappointment and can easily end up blaming ourselves.

If we are not shown that the goal of Christian living is to bring everything in our lives into relationship with God, we can end up as the worst kind of Sunday Christian who makes all the right spiritual noises but effectively lives the rest of the week as though God did not exist.

Meeting up with Simon was really helpful because I asked him what are the key things that he has learned in all his years of helping people grow deeper in their discipleship using Followers of the Way.

The first thing he said is to recognise that you are not alone. In this church just as in loads of Churches up and down the land there are people who want to help you grow. Trust me, if you said to someone this week, 'I'd like to grow deeper in my relationship with the Lord this year, could you help me?' They would, I'm sure, be delighted to help you, and actually they would end up growing themselves too. The Celtic Christians called these spiritual encouragers *soul-friends* and growing these soul friendships is a key component to healthy life together in a church body. More on this next week.

The second thing that Simon told me is to recognise that the discipleship journey is taken one step at a time. If you know you want to grow as a disciple, you're probably doing better than you think!

Following the Way doesn't just mean knowing more facts about Jesus, it is about nurturing a distinctive way of life, alongside some soul-friends with a rhythm of prayer, work and recreation. It is those one-degree shifts in our behaviour over time that make a huge long-term difference to our walk. Change happens when we invite the Holy Spirit to work in us and as we learn to receive from him together.

In Paul's final letter to Timothy from prison he wrote these words in 2 Timothy 3: '*You know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions and sufferings.*' This is like a concise curriculum for discipleship, but notice what are at the top of the list. Number one is his Teaching, literally *Doctrine*, but second is Paul's 'way of life'. Having good teaching is really important for helping us discern God's wisdom as against flawed worldly wisdom, but second on Paul's discipleship list is his Way of Life. Literally his 'Agoge'. Agoge is still in use in modern Greek today meaning training or education. It was used in ancient Sparta to describe the gruelling military training regime that every young boy over the age of 7 would be subjected to.

Discipleship is about developing ways to train ourselves to be more like Christ.

In his book Simon Reed unpacks the three core practices of the community of Aidan and Hilda which he felt were missing from his London churches but are essential if we are going to grow in authentic Christian discipleship. They are *Sharing a Way of Life*, *Journeying with a Soul Friend*, and *joining in a rhythm of prayer*.

We're going to be looking at these over the coming term, starting with 10 marks or 'Waymarks' of a way of life that provide a simple and memorable set of guidelines to help us get an idea of what being a disciple of Jesus looks like in our time and setting. As we check how we are doing on each one we can assess our own discipleship goals and keep on track if we start to wander.

Now we are not living in a monastery and each of us is living busy lives, but nevertheless as Simon Reed suggests, if we as individuals commit ourselves to developing a shared way of life along with our church family then actually our distinctiveness and witness as a church will be amplified. I am excited because I am convinced as the Lord highlights even one of these waymarks in our lives, we can receive new blessings from him as we share this journey together.

The first waymark is 'Be a lifelong learner' because the word *disciple* comes from the Latin word *discipulus* meaning "student." On my first day at theological college I was very struck by the fact that the Principal welcomed us by saying 'Hello, my name is George Kavoor and I am a student of Jesus.' To follow Jesus is to be a lifelong learner of the way of Jesus.

One of the things that I love reading about Jesus' disciples is that they were always asking him questions - even dumb ones at times! A church is a centre of lifelong learning where questions are welcome. It may take time to get all the answers but questions are always welcome. I want this church to be a safe place to ask questions and learn.

In our reading from Matthew Jesus says '*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*'

When a Rabbi agreed to train a disciple, to take on their yoke was a standard Jewish phrase for saying that the student agreed to submit to the Rabbi's authority and interpretation of the scriptures. The imagery is of two oxen bound together with a shaped wooden beam in order to work together to plough a furrow. Unevenly matched oxen could simply plough in circles until they learned to keep in step together. But instead of simply dominating through power, Jesus promises to help us learn one step at a time – and first on his list of priorities for learning is being gentle and humble in heart. Instead of stressing us out, the end result of learning from Jesus is actually rest for our souls. It is counter-intuitive but the more you know of Jesus, the more you will rest easy. That is the nature of the new covenant and everything that Jesus came to give us.

Simon Reed suggests there are 5 principle ways we learn the ways of Jesus:

- 1) We learn first and foremost from the Bible. The inspired Word of God which contains everything we need for learning to live as effective Christians – in other words our salvation and sanctification. We need to study the bible daily. Use a helpful translation. Our goto version here is the New International Version or NIV, but other versions can be really helpful for getting to the real meaning. I follow a reading plan that I picked up from a beach mission when I was 18. I have kept copying it over the years but if you would like a copy I have made some available at the back.
- 2) Secondly we learn from Creation. The Irish missionary Columbanus spoke of there being two books – the book of scripture and the book of creation. 'If you wish to know the creator', he said, 'Get to know his creatures.' Jesus and Paul illustrated spiritual truths using the natural world. Some scientists conclude that there is no creator and we are all here by cosmic accident, but there are many others who marvel at God's handiwork and celebrate the divine order that has been brought out of chaos. Nature around us can teach us so much about God's Beauty, creativity, power, and grace.

- 3) Thirdly we learn from Life experiences. Sometimes even the testing or negative experiences can be the most helpful teacher. Corrie ten Boom spent years in a Nazi concentration camp but she said 'Every experience God gives us, every person He puts in our lives is the perfect preparation for a future that only He can see.' Whether you are on the mountaintop or in the darkest valley, God is there with you.
- 4) Fourthly we learn from other Christians. Here at All Saints there is a wealth of wisdom to draw on. People here have experienced God's hand at work in so many ways. Ask them to share their experiences and learn from them. Then there are also Christians from the past who can inspire us – or indeed warn us too. I have been reading Ray Stedman's biography over the last couple of weeks and I have found it really refreshing and helpful.
- 5) Finally we learn from our imagination. Creativity and the Arts can help us think in new ways. When we apply ourselves to thinking outside the box sometimes God can break through to us in unexpected ways. It is never too late to try something new!

So in summary: Followers of the way are lifelong learners – students of Jesus. As we learn together this term about sharing a way of life, nurturing soul friendships and developing rhythms of prayer, let's pray that our discipleship will deepen and we will hear God's voice. Keep learning, keep growing, keep loving and the glory of the Lord will be revealed!