

Follow Me

A couple of years ago I was walking across Parker's Piece, a large area of Greenland in the centre of Cambridge. It had been raining and there were several pools of water, so I picked my way carefully across the giant square of lawn, as though I were navigating my way through the fens. Coming in the other direction, I saw a gothic looking teenager, lolloping along, hunched over, dressed from head to toe in black with a big black overcoat and his long black hair covering his face as he stared at the ground no more than a two feet in front of him. And then I noticed that there right in the path of this chap who bounded forward staring right down at the ground, was an enormous puddle which had not yet entered his radar. And I was desperate to see what would happen when he arrived. This chap's gloominess looked so powerful that it would have parted the waters of the puddle as Moses parted the Red Sea. Needless to say, I lingered.

And just as it looked as though the knee-high doctor marten boots were about to splash into the puddle, something incredible happened. In a split second, The entire physiology and demeanour of this chap transformed. And with an almighty and apparently slow-motion leap that seemed to defy both gravity and psychology, his long hair opened up like a pair of curtains blown by a window being opened, his handsome and animated face was gloriously revealed, his arms were lifted high and every sinew of his body was pushed to the limits as, for that split second, he was liberated, ecstatic, a total contradiction of all that his walk had radiated. It was a timeless moment. And then ... he landed, and as suddenly as he had been transformed into a godlike picture of carefree energy, he reverted back to the gloomy, tired boy with the weight of the world pressing down upon his dark frame.

I'd never seen anything like it, and it is permanently emblazoned on my memory. But it struck me as a picture of worship as it is experienced by so many Christians. The daily grind, unremarkable, weight of the world pressing down upon us – and then once a week, if we're lucky – we enter a church to feel unburdened for that timeless moment, before we immediately return, unchanged, untransformed, back to the daily grind of the week. Doesn't worship mean something more than this?

The Gospel reading suggests that there is. Peter has just recognised that Jesus is the Messiah, and like everyone else, had his own wish list of things that the Messiah really should do! He is the representative of his people, and should lead his people to freedom, freedom from the Romans, and glory for the nation. And Jesus was the one to do it. But then, Jesus – having admitted that he was the Christ, the Messiah, starts harping on about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die! Well, hold on a minute, if you were really were the Messiah, surely you would not be that defeatist! Okay, Jesus has mentioned that he would be raised from the dead after three days, but nobody had any idea what on earth that meant.

But, Peter's concern may not have been simply – No, we can't let that happen to the Messiah – suffering and dying to fulfil God's purpose! No, the Messiah was representative of the people. What he does, the people do! So if the Messiah is to suffer and die, than the people too are destined to suffer and die! And we can't have that! So, not surprisingly, Peter says – erm, hold on a minute – this will never happen to you, God would not let it happen.

So, having just described Peter as the rock on which the church is built, Jesus now describes him as a satanic stumbling block, resisting the will of God. Can't help feeling a little bit sorry for Peter here: But Jesus continues with a bizarre demand. That anyone that would be his

follower, anyone that would be one of his people, must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him! What's that all about. That the people of this Messiah are people destined to suffer! Who is it that dies on a cross? It's rebels against Rome – Jesus is leading his people to defeat, apparently. But he claims that it is only through this total defeat, this baptism, this death, that they truly encounter real, practical, tangible victory: whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it!

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. And on his way to suffering and death, he says, 'follow me'. Who, in their right mind, will see someone merrily walking towards a cliff top, saying 'follow me', and choose to follow him! But here, it speaks of the true and total commitment for which Jesus is calling. 87 times in the Gospels, Jesus says 'follow, me'. Now, at some level – you can't go playing the numbers game with Scripture. I once heard a preacher arguing that there are 50 chapters on the tabernacle, and only 1 on creation. So Christians should know 50 times as much about the tabernacle as they do about creation! I suppose the only snag being, that were it not for the creation then there wouldn't be a tabernacle! You have to be careful when playing the numbers game – but equally, we can see phrases that are important, one of the principles of form criticism, looking at how often they occur and what weight is placed upon them.

In the Gospels, on 87 occasions, Jesus says, 'follow me', 'follow me'. And he is on his way to suffering and death! Jesus never said to his potential followers, 'he – believe in me, I'm the second person of the Trinity.' But 87 times he says follow me.

He never says, 'acknowledge my existence'. He never says, 'I'm your divine insurance policy against eternal damnation. But 87 times he says follow me.

He never says, I'm your first class ticket to paradise, he never says, offer your academic assent to the correct facts about my historicity. But 87 times he says follow me.

We can do all the right things, tick all the right boxes, subscribe to all the correct beliefs, be partially or totally committed to issues of justice and righteousness. We can jump through all the right hoops, embody all the correct behaviours without actually following Jesus. This is where the reading from Corinthians is leading us looking at all the Christian gifts within the body of Christ, before chapter 13 reminds us that we can do everything perfectly, but without loving this Jesus, we do whatever we do pointlessly.

Jesus never said, try really hard, don't let me down, don't get it wrong. But 87 times he says those terrifying words: follow me. We can try to embody all the right Christian ideals and so on, we can enjoy our worship experience, before trudging back through our daily lives untouched and untransformed. But when we take this Jesus seriously, we cannot escape this inconvenient truth that 87 times he says 'follow me'.

Application:

How this looks in action? When a community of people put their lives on the line because of the Gospel. A report on Radio 4 this morning highlighted precisely this, and led to the execution of several members of the community.

A French village which saved 3,000 Jews from the Holocaust was admitted last year to the state memorial for national heroes. The heroism of Chambon-sur-Lignon was largely

unknown, or ignored, in France for many years after the end of the Second World War. Two Protestant pastors in the Cévennes mountains in south-east France persuaded thousands of villagers to hide Jews, including many children.

The story of the village still remains little known abroad, except in Israel. Chambon-sur-Lignon is the only place - rather than individual - listed in Israel's official roll-call of the Righteous of Nations: Gentiles who rescued Jews from Nazi persecution. It is estimated that 3,000 Jews were saved by the people of Chambon-sur-Lignon, compared to the 1,200 rescued by Oskar Schindler, the Austrian businessman celebrated in the 1993 movie Schindler's List.

Chambon-sur-Lignon was in the Vichy-controlled, "free" zone of France. A number of Jews fleeing arrest by the Germans and by the French police turned up in the village at random in the autumn of 1940. When the villagers helped them, the word spread to other refugees and to a Swiss organisation which smuggled Jews across the border.

Hundreds of mostly young Jews were hidden for the duration of the war by farming families. Others were hidden and then taken to Switzerland. Two Protestant pastors, André Trocmé and Edouard Theis, persuaded their parishioners - and the pastors of surrounding villages - that it was their Christian duty to "oppose violence against their conscience". They sent out an edict that the Nazis should be resisted "without fear, without pride and without hatred".

The priests were responsible for the action in the first place, preaching to their congregations that providing refuge, shelter and escape for Jewish people was simply part of living out the Gospel. One of the priest's family members was sent to the gas chamber for her part in aiding Jewish escape, and the priest himself had to go into hiding.

One old lady interviewed had said she saw it as nothing remarkable. She simply said that in the bible it says that if your neighbour is hungry, you feed him, if a stranger needs shelter, you provide it.

On Radio 4 this morning, it was asked why it had taken so long for France to recognise the heroism of this village specifically. And the reason suggested was that with France being a deeply secular state, the protestant Christian motivation for this heroism was an embarrassment !

For this Christian community, following Jesus did not mean some great and mighty display of courage. These French protestants did not realise they were being courageous, or historical or political. They just were just living out the Scriptures they loved. Listening to the radio interviews of these farmers, was like reading chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel – when did we see you hungry, or naked or in prison or in need ? What you did for the least of these, you did for me...'

Jesus never said, keep your worship lively, make sure your liturgy is sound. He never said Buy the right newspaper, vote for the right political party. 87 times he said follow me. And when he said those things, he was on his way towards suffering and death. But also to resurrection.

Not every example of this will be the same. Following Jesus may mean political campaigning, it may mean changing our shopping habits. It may also mean risking life and

limb for the sake of justice. But we can't predetermine what the application will look like. Far better to be like those French farmers who look to Jesus and lived the Scriptures. Historical circumstance will determine the rest.

Worshipping this Jesus, is not some detached, spectator event, that leaves you untouched. This Jesus addresses us individually, calls us to carry our cross, and every day, to every one of us, he says, 'follow me'.