

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?”

2. Called By Jesus

John 1:35-51

If you were here last week, you'll know that we're going to spend a bit of time over the first few weeks of the New Year exploring what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We've entitled the series "*Are You Serious?*" as a way of reminding ourselves that following Jesus is not something to be taken lightly or to be seen as an easy option. As we introduced the subject last week, we looked at a story in *John 6* in which many of those who'd been following Jesus around in the early days of his ministry, as his popularity began to grow, found that when he started explaining the commitment involved they couldn't take it and either started grumbling or just walked away. Being a disciple of Jesus means being very serious about doing as he says and following his ways, despite the ways in which we might find ourselves at odds with what is going on around us and with the natural tendencies of our human nature – all of which we'll look at more closely as the weeks go by, both here on Sunday mornings and in the midweek housegroups.

If you want to have a look at the whole subject of discipleship yourself, then there are one or two resources you might like to try. The late, great David Watson wrote a book back in 1981 called simply *Discipleship*. The illustrations are a bit dated now (although I think there might be a revised version), but it's a great book from the kind of charismatic Anglican corner. Around the same time Chris Sugden's *Radical Discipleship* was also published, which has a lot to say about lifestyle and justice issues for a Christian. Then there's John Stott's *The Radical Disciple* – John Stott's always worth reading – and the classic book by the German pastor martyred by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called *The Cost of Discipleship*, which really is for those who are serious. Krish Kandia's more recent book is also very helpful and very easy to read. It's called *Dysciples* (with a "y") and is subtitled "*Why I fall asleep when I pray and twelve other discipleship dysfunctions*". It's well worth a read because it deals with the kind of things that affect us all as we try hard to put Jesus' words into practice. (All those titles are currently available on Amazon, if you're interested.) There are plenty of websites with material on, but if you're interested in putting this into practice day by day, then the LICC website (licc.org.uk) is good, and the URC (urc.org.uk) currently has some great material under the heading of *Walking The Way* (much of it also based on the LICC material).

But on to this morning's reflection on Jesus and his disciples from the narrative of the Gospels. We're going to focus in on the story we heard just now and look at the fact that disciples are **Called By Jesus**. After last week's sermon someone asked me about who is called by Jesus and the answer is, basically, everyone. Everyone has the opportunity to become a disciple of Jesus. What makes the difference is our response to that call. That might be a bit simplistic (and all you die-hard Calvinists can come and put me

right over coffee) but we certainly need to act as if Jesus invites everyone to join him on this journey towards reconciliation with God and towards playing a part in the establishing of his Kingdom here on earth, as well as enjoying the benefits of that in the eternal future.

The story we've just heard is about some particular people who did respond to that call. Now, of course, these were particular individuals living in a specific geographical place, in a very different culture from ours and in a different time. But as we look at Jesus' call to them and at their response, we see that there are certain things that we can, if you like, transfer to our situation today, things that are true whoever we are, and wherever and whenever we live.

A couple of brief points before we really get into that. Firstly, Jesus is described by John the Baptist as "*the Lamb of God*". For those first century Jews that was a real jaw dropper. That phrase had so many implications for them and fitted in so well with what they already knew and believed about God that it was sure to stop them in their tracks. We could spend all morning looking at what that meant for them, but the main thing for us to grasp in the context of our thinking today is that this was someone very special – indeed, this was someone clearly sent by God. This call of Jesus on the lives of Andrew, Simon and the others was a call from someone very special – unique, in fact. And that continues to be the case. This isn't just some rabble-rouser out for our attention, some religious charlatan looking for popularity, some gifted orator who influences through the power of his intellect and his ability with words, some self-styled Messiah figure out to start his own religion. We are talking about the Lamb of God, the eternal Son of God, a human expression of the awesome vastness of God and his astounding grace, whose coming into our world had been planned by God from eternity. He is worth listening to and worth taking seriously.

And secondly, most of these people were drawn to Jesus by the words of someone else. John pointed Jesus out to Andrew and he went and told his brother what he had discovered. Then Philip, who had encountered Jesus, went and told Nathanael all about him. There are, of course, stories of people discovering Jesus for themselves or of Jesus making himself known to people directly (through dreams or whatever) – there are some in the New Testament and more in the books of Church history and the paperback testimonies of those who have had dramatic experiences of conversion. But the vast majority of people hear of the call of Jesus through someone else – a friend, a colleague, a family member. Never forget that your experience of Jesus, your story of how you encountered him, can be used, quite naturally, to help others discover him and hear his call. And what can we say about that call? Well, three basic things this morning that might help you to identify that call from Jesus and help influence your response.

1. JESUS' CALL IS SIMPLE

There are many examples in the Gospel narrative of Jesus' calling people. And more often than not, all he seems to do is do what he did with Philip. He says quite simply "*Follow me*" (v43). There doesn't even appear to be any explanation. It's the same with Levi (or Matthew). To Andrew, he just says, "*Come with me*" and then spends the rest of the day talking with him. He calls these people just where they are and just as they are. There's no entrance exam, no request for referees, no examination of their character or intelligence or physical ability or whatever. There's not even an opportunity for these people to discover a bit more before they make their decision. He invites them, and if they choose to accept that call, he turns them into real disciples.

In his book which I mentioned earlier (*Dysciples*), Krish Kandia points out that it was very unusual for teachers simply to invite people to join them, for rabbis to take on people who were not deemed suitable. Let me read you a couple of paragraphs from that book, as Krish puts it much better than I could. (*Dysciples* pp14,15).

Jesus' call still goes out today. He is still recruiting disciples. He is still wanting to transform lives that will then have an impact on the lives of others. It's a simple call – "*Follow me*" – and it comes to you just where you are, just as you are. You don't need to have got it all sorted out in your mind already. You don't need amazing gifts in theology or some kind of already recognised ministry. There's no expectation that you will be a pillar of the establishment or a leader in your field. Jesus is interested in you just as you are this morning and he wants to make a real difference in your life. He wants you as a disciple even though he knows what you're like. Which is really our next point here ...

2 JESUS KNOWS US

We have often said, haven't we, that Jesus loves us so much that he accepts us just as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us that way. He knows us – our strengths and our weaknesses, our good points and our bad. He knows everything about us – as he did these first potential disciples.

Now it's possible, of course, that Andrew had told Jesus a bit about his brother before he met Simon, but I imagine that Simon was still quite surprised when Jesus said to him, "*Oh, you're John's lad, aren't you?*" (I'm sometimes quite surprised at how much visitors to the church know about me, depending on

who they been sitting next to in the service!) And this rough and ready fisherman, who throughout the Gospels always seems to be putting his foot in it and saying the most ridiculous things, is the one whom Jesus will eventually use as the foundational rock of his Church. He prepares for that by renaming him “Rocky” as soon as he meets him. And then he goes on to meet Nathanael, who is so surprised at what Jesus says that he responds *“How do you know me?”*

Jesus knows these men and he must be aware that they all have shortcomings which could in many ways jeopardise the success of his project of salvation, of building the Kingdom of God. Yet he calls them and uses them, teaching them and encouraging them to become the people he wants them to be, people of whom later writers will say that they are the very backbone of the Church.

Jesus knows you. He knows what makes you tick. He knows what you have done. He knows what skeletons are lurking in your closets. He knows what gifts and abilities you have that maybe others are unaware of – or that you yourself might currently be unaware of. He knows what you could become if you take seriously his call to be a disciple.

Now, for some of us, that might be a bit of a worry. We don’t like people knowing about us. In these days of GDPR and carefully managed profiles, of privacy and self-sufficiency, we like to keep ourselves to ourselves – just in case, you never know. But I’m afraid here’s no form to fill in or set of boxes to tick to consent to what Jesus knows about us – and despite what he knows, he still wants us on board. And despite what he knows, he can still make saints out of each and every one of us, should we respond positively to his call. Because the things that he knows about us that may be not so good he can put right – as was the case with Simon Peter. And those things that he knows about us that are good and helpful he can develop and use for the good of the Kingdom and the glory of his name – as with Nathanael. In fact, part of his call is that there is much more to be enjoyed if we follow him.

3. JESUS PROMISES US GREATER THINGS

You see, part of the attraction of the call of Jesus to be his disciples is that there is better stuff in store for us. Your life might be a real mess at the moment and you just can’t see how things are going to move forward. Or things might be on the up for you, everything’s going well and you’re happy with the way things have turned out. We don’t know quite what the situation was for Andrew, Simon, Philip or Nathanael, but we know that there were plenty of other people whom Jesus called who were really in the pits – Zacchaeus, for example, and probably Levi – and their lives were dramatically transformed. Nathanael was clearly very impressed with Jesus and Jesus seemed to think he was a good guy too. But

look at what Jesus promises him: there are greater things in store for him. Greater things than meeting the Lamb of God face to face? Yes, all kinds of miracles and astonishing situations that Philip and the others would experience over the next three years, culminating in the uniquely spectacular resurrection after a dramatic death on the cross.

Whatever your situation at the moment, Jesus promises greater things. The greatest, of course, is the rediscovery of your destiny as a friend of God, enjoying his presence and power for all eternity, something that starts here and now as you accept that call to be a disciple. We could go round this congregation this morning, I'm sure, and ask people whether they've seen and experienced greater things since accepting Jesus' call. Some of you may not, as yet, have had that happen to you, but there will be plenty of others who will be able to testify to amazing things happening in their lives. We hope to give you the opportunity of sharing some of those things with us as part of our worship in the weeks to come. You see, being serious about discipleship is never going to mean that you stick with the status quo. As we've said so often, Jesus is in the business of transformation. Follow Jesus and things will change – for the better. There will be challenges along the way. It's not that life just becomes a real doddle, but as we face those challenges and deal with those struggles, Jesus is there making a difference. His call is there for you this morning. Are you up for it?

And just as we close, a final thing to take away from this story. What's the first thing these first disciples did after they'd accepted Jesus' call? They went and told other people about Jesus. Andrew brought his brother to Jesus and that eventually led to the building up of the Church. Philip rushed off and told his friend Nathanael and before long he had joined Philip in this embryonic bunch of world-changers and Kingdom-builders. They were excited about Jesus and the possibilities – eager to find out what greater things they would be a part of. If you really take this seriously, you might get excited – you never know – and end up telling other people just how amazing Jesus is. Listen for his call – and whatever you do, don't reject it.

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And the first thing these first disciples did after they'd accepted Jesus' call was to go and tell other people about Jesus. They were excited about Jesus and the possibilities – eager to find out what greater things they would be a part of. If you really take this seriously, you might get excited – you never know – and end up telling other people just how amazing Jesus is. Listen for his call – and whatever you do, don't reject it.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Why do you think these people responded to such a simple and direct call? Do we make it too complicated today?
- 2) Is it true that the call is there for everyone? Why/why not?
- 3) How do you feel about Jesus knowing everything about you? Does it make a difference to your life?
- 4) It is often said that the most effective witnesses for Jesus are those who have recently met him? Why do you think that is? And what makes us more reluctant to share as time goes by?

5) How serious would you say you are about being a disciple of Jesus? Is that reflected in your daily life?

<i>Discipleship</i>	David Watson	1981 (revised 2014)	Hodder & Stoughton
<i>Radical Discipleship</i>	Chris Sugden	1981	Marshalls
<i>The Radical Disciple</i>	John Stott	2013	IVP
<i>The Cost of Discipleship</i>	Dietrich Bonhoeffer	(new edition) 2015	SCM Press
<i>Dysciples: Why I fall asleep when I pray and twelve other discipleship dysfunctions</i>	Krish Kandia	2009	Authentic Publishing

LICC website licc.org.uk (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity)

Walking The Way urc.org.uk/our-work/walking-the-way