2nd February 2014

Luke 5:1–11; 27-32

**Follow Jesus – Don’t be Daft**

This month the theme for our services is ‘Following Jesus’. It is plainly obvious that the vast majority of people in this country do not care about following Jesus – don’t be daft – would be their response.

Between now and the end of summer I have to produce a 20,000 word dissertation as part of my final year of my Master’s Degree in Christian Spirituality. I’m looking at the changes in our culture and how it affects people’s perception and participation in the Christian faith. Some sociologists[[1]](#endnote-1) suggest that there has been a turn away from religion to spirituality – They define religion as living by external authorities, rules, revelations from above and trying to live your life in conformity to those ideals. Spirituality is more self-centred - about individuals wanting to follow their own path and value their own experiences rather than try to conform to any set ideals. People want to choose how to live their lives and seek what will resource them for living their unique lives.

Therefore the idea of following someone else is not going to be very popular according to these sociologists.

Mind you many of these sociologists are fairly pessimistic about the chances of the church. Full stop.

One sociologist I have been reading, Steve Bruce, predicts that the church will have virtually vanished from our cultural landscape by 2050. His predictions are based on the pattern of gradual decline in church membership and the age profile and outlook of those who are current church members. In other words most current church members will be dead by 2050. The ones who are church members at the moment aren’t being very successful or very keen about passing on their faith and crucially there are virtually no children in the churches – all of which has huge implications for the future.

Bruce is a Scotsman and as I was reading his book I kept thinking of Corporal Fraser from Dads Army - ‘Doomed, you’re all doomed’.

So why bother hanging around a sinking ship? Why bother to follow Jesus. Why bother to swim against the tide of a society who are not following Jesus? Follow Jesus – Don’t be daft?

Let’s look at the story of how the first disciples decided to follow Jesus. I’ll suggest three reasons to follow Jesus - and they all begin with ‘D’ – just so you can remember them over lunch.

**The first D is for Dare. Follow Jesus because it’s a dare.**

Jesus is talking to this crowd by the lakeside. There is a lot of people there and some fishermen. In front of this crowd he dares the fishermen – to put out into deep water and lower their nets.

They haven’t caught any fish all night, and although its daylight, when the fish are less likely to be caught because they can see the nets, Jesus tells them to put out into deep water and let down your nets.

It’s a dare. You can almost hear Simon Peter the fishermen reply ‘don’t be stupid’. But Jesus is daring him to take a chance on him. Everyone is watching. Will Simon get in the boat and take the challenge.

There is a story about the great explorer, Sir Francis Drake, who was once attempting to recruit a number of young men for an upcoming exploration. He gathered them around and told the group that if they came with him they would see some of the most marvellous things their eyes could ever behold. Sandy white beaches, juicy fruits, foreign peoples, priceless treasures, and gorgeous landscapes. And he told them that this wild adventure could be theirs if they came with him. Not one of them enlisted for the journey.

The next day a different group came out. Drake told them that if they came with him they would encounter storms that would terrify them into tears. Tiger winds would hammer them and blow them off course for months. Water would frequently be scarce. At times they will be so thirsty that their very souls would cry out for simply one drop of water. In short, danger  
would always be their constant companion.

Drake concluded by declaring that if they could handle these things, the joys of exploration would exceed their wildest dreams.

Every single one of them in the group joined Sir Francis Drake that day, some did not even go home to say goodbye to their families, they just boarded the boat eager for the journey.  
  
What made the difference in these two groups? Why did the first group turn down the mission and the second jump at the chance? Was the second group different and more adventurous than the first? Maybe it wasn’t the men who had changed; perhaps it was the message. The first spoke of rewards; the second spoke of challenges. The first offered comfort; the second promised suffering. The first tempted them with things; the second seduced them with an experience unlike any other.  
  
I like to think that Sir Francis Drake discovered what Jesus knew all to well. And that is this: The paths that are offered to us must promise to shape us, build our character, change our world view, if they are to have any appeal to us at all. If we are presented with a challenge that will change, we will be eager for the journey.

Following Jesus Christ will change you and challenge you. It will be hard and will involve suffering. But at the end of your life you will look back and say ‘it’s been quite a ride.

We went with the Men’s group on Thursday night to the climbing wall in Gloucester. And climbing up to a height of about four storeys is both exhilarating and scary. But at least you are on the end of a rope.

Following Jesus Christ should be as exhilarating and scary as a climbing wall – loving people who are hard to love, sharing good news with those who are in deepest darkness, standing up for justice, trying to bring peace and reconciliation where there is none, winning souls in the spiritual battle between good and evil – what higher stakes are there? What bigger thrills can you get? And there is no safety rope.

It a huge dare. Can you dare to be different? That phrase is overdone in advertising – trying to sell you a new car, or new clothes. It is a challenge to follow Jesus Christ in our society – you have to dare to be different – it will take guts, courage, bravery and the Holy Spirit’s empowering to do it – but those who follow Jesus today are usually the stronger for it – they have responded to the dare.

**Secondly – follow Jesus because he will take you Deep**.

Jesus challenges these fishermen in their mundane living, in their average lifestyles, in their routine jobs – to go deeper – to cast their nets again but this time with Jesus by their side.

They are called to put out into the deep.

When I was learning to swim I remember the instructor saying stay in the shallow end – don’t go into the deep end. And I was terrified of crossing that line. Being in the early 1970s Jaws had just come out as a movie and I think I had this fear that the deep end was shark infested.

We use the expression we are in too deep – to suggest that we have taken on too much – or what we are involved in is beyond our means, our competency, and our knowledge. We talk about being in deep do dos when it gets really bad. Other people talk about people going deep when they start talking about their emotions or deep feelings, or values or faith.

For example, I’ve been in conversations with people and we get talking about what happens after death and they say ‘oh that’s a bit too deep fro me!’ – They don’t want to go there- because they might be afraid to confront such issues– better to stay on the surface – stay with the superficial stuff of life – don’t go deep.

I’m not sure whether Luke intended the symbolism but it’s there to be used by an imaginative preacher – Jesus saying go deep – don’t be afraid.

I know that Mindfulness’ is all the rage at the moment. It’s a form of Meditation in which you try to confront your deep feelings and yet not be afraid of them. The way we think and the way we handle how we feel plays a big part in mental health. [Taking a mindfulness course](http://www.bemindful.co.uk/learn/about) it is claimed can give people more insight into their emotions, boost their attention and concentration and improve relationships. The health service is sending people with depression on these courses.

In many ways the church has been doing mindfulness for centuries. We do it every week – in worship we come to confess and confront our true self – not a false self. We come without distractions before God, not making excuses but being real. Prayer is about being still before God and attentive to God’s creation, ourselves and the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We talk about deep stuff in church – life, death, suffering, joy, hope, peace, love. You get the deep stuff of life here.

But different to mindfulness, we meditate on God’s word to us; we meditate on God’s goodness and love towards us. So the glorious truth is that even when there are things we cannot face in ourselves God embraces us and loves us still.

The cross of Jesus reminds us that he died for our sins – all of them – the very worse – you are accepted and forgiven.

Simon the fisherman wants Jesus to leave him because he is a sinful man. But Jesus doesn’t. Instead he doesn’t dwell on Simon’s failings or inadequacies – but says come follow me – I have a new life for you – a new task and purpose – recreate yourself – you will be called Simon Peter – you will change as you journey with me.

You follow Jesus because he will show you your true self – and he will still accept you and forgive you. Then you will be truly free.

Following Jesus will take you deep.

**Finally, and most importantly, follow Jesus because he is the Dude**. (Forgive the corny youth speak – but FURY stay in on communion Sundays.) Jesus is the Dude. He is the Man.

Who can forgive sins – but God alone? Don’t get me wrong, learning to forgive yourself is important: mindfulness I’m sure may be helpful. Those suffering from anxiety and depression often suffer from a disorder of judgments. They are flooded by shoulds and oughts. Their self-talk does not seem to come from the Lord but are already laced with prejudice. 'You should have been more vigilant against danger AND you weren't. You're a failure.' 'You shouldn't be rebellious BUT you always mess up.' Mindfulness, then, is stepping back from these narratives[[2]](#endnote-2) -

But if there is a God, then ultimately God’s opinion of us is the one that matters. I get the privilege to say things at funerals about the deceased but it is not my opinion that ultimately counts: it is God’s. Simon Peter says get away from me I’m a sinful man. Jesus says ‘don’t be afraid – come I’ll make you fishers of men’.

Levi the tax collector is despised by his community because he is working for the Romans imposing their taxes and probably cheating the locals. Jesus says come follow me. Levi holds a banquet for Jesus because here is someone who values him and can see a new life for Levi and will take a chance on him. The Pharisees, the religious holy people complain – who does Jesus think he is – eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus responds that it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick and that he has come to call not the righteous but sinners to repent.

Who does he think he is? Does he think he’s Jesus?

He is the Dude. There are many good people in history, many inspiring leaders, many great teachers, and many religions. The stumbling block about Christianity is that we believe we follow the Dude. The one who died and rose again. The one who has the authority to say ‘your sins are forgiven’. ‘Don’t be afraid’. ‘Come follow me’.

To coin C S Lewis famous phrase – he is either a liar, a lunatic or the Lord. A deceiver, a despot or the Dude.

At the end of this month we are hoping to have a major outreach by using the courtyard café opposite to host some meetings entitled Christianity Explored. I hope it will offer a relaxed informal way for people to do what it says on the tin – in other words have a good grown up conversation about the Christian faith and who is Jesus and what does he mean today.

The major challenges will be to invite people to those meetings and to get them to come. If you are brave enough to ask someone – they may well think that all Christians are weird. They will think that Christianity is irrelevant and of no practical use to their life. They may think that’s it’s all untrue and an old myth that intelligent modern people have outgrown. You will get rejected. Expect disappointment. Expect delay – people will show interest but when it comes to it they can’t be bothered – other things will distract them. But also expect dramatic results – because God is still alive and doing his work drawing people in faith through his Spirit. When you believe in God, when you follow Jesus you are operating in a different dimension – not just the material realm but also the spiritual realm. Not just the world of predictability and the laws of physics but also the dimension of prayer and hope and God’s impossible possibilities.

When I was preparing for this sermon I looked up my notes from the last time I preached on this passage – back in February 2010. We had just had a moving celebration of the life of one of our members, Lilian King. I told how Lilian at the age of 24 got married to Paul and then four months later in the middle of the Second World War, boarded a troop ship that took them to the other side of the world as missionaries in the London Missionary Society.

When Lilian got engaged to Paul she knew he was going to go abroad as a missionary. They both expected to be posted to India but just after they were married the Holy Spirit had other ideas and they were sent to Africa. Lilian had hardly been out of her hometown of Bristol before she got married. What a massive step to take to trek half way around the world to Rhodesia, Zimbabwe as it is known now – and to find a mission station in the middle of the bush –with no electricity, no doctors, none of the modern comforts.

Today we would be thinking about the risk assessment! Today we would be wondering how much we would have to pay for an insurance policy travelling on a troop ship for six weeks on the oceans in the middle of the war.

But she went. Michael her son said it was down to faith hope and love. Love for Paul – she wanted to go where he was going – but the love and faith and hope they had in God. Both of them had confidence that they were held in the love of God. That they knew through Jesus Christ. That good news was what they went the other side of the world to share with others.

They took up the dare to follow Jesus; they went into deep waters, all because they believed Jesus was the Dude, the Saviour, and the Son of God.

Dare you be different? Dare you go deep? Dare you declare Jesus as Lord and Saviour?

Jesus says come follow me. We gather rather round his table at his invitation for

1. Towards the end of the 1990s three academics at Lancaster University, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead of the Department of Religious Studies, and Bronislaw Szerszynski of the Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy, decided to use Kendal as the location for the first locality study of contemporary religious and spiritual life in Britain.

   They studied the clearly visible associational activities of church and chapel. They came to refer to this as ‘*the congregational domain*’. The other was less obvious: the more ‘invisible’ activities of what is often termed ‘alternative spirituality’, which they came to refer to as ‘*the holistic milieu*’.

   The book of the Kendal Project, *The Spiritual Revolution,* was published in 2005. The book begins with the claim made by some commentators that traditional forms of religion appear to be declining, whilst new forms of alternative spirituality are growing. Drawing on their evidence from Kendal, they set out to test this claim. In a nutshell, they argued that whilst there is a good deal of evidence to support it, involvement in church and chapel still outweighs that in alternative spirituality – but the latter is catching up fast.

   The explanation they offered for this ‘spiritual revolution’ is that *the forms of religion or spirituality that are doing best are those that help resource individuals in the living of their unique lives.* These can be Christian or alternative. In either case, what people are seeking are forms of religiosity that make sense to them, rather than those which demand that they subordinate their personal truth to some higher authority. In other words, we are witnessing a ‘subjectivisation’ or ‘democratisation’ of the sacred. Individuals want to follow their own path and value their own experiences rather than try to conform to an external higher authority. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See more at: http://www.mindandsoul.info/Articles/195095/Mind\_and\_Soul/Resources/Articles/Mindfulness/Mindfulness\_for\_Christians.aspx#sthash.pym1xlO6.dpuf [↑](#endnote-ref-2)