

Sermon 3 February 2019

‘Commitment’

Matthew 8:18-22

This is a very interesting short passage, and I want to have a look at two aspects of it. Firstly, verse 19, *‘Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you no matter where you go!”’*

This passage follows on immediately after the account of several instances of miraculous healing by Jesus, and this short exchange is a kind of miracle in itself. It is the miracle of the impact of Jesus on the lives of men and women. We often read of how people were prepared to make all sorts of sacrifices or commitments to Jesus after first meeting him.

‘A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their nets. And he called to them to come, too. They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.’ Matthew 4:21. This is but one example, and follows immediately after Peter and Andrew had made the same spontaneous commitment.

What a statement this makes about the magnetism of Jesus, the power of his personality. Some people have a certain mana because of the accident of their birth. With Jesus, not only did his birth give him a certain prestige but on top of that, he had this incredibly powerful personality. That is one of the reasons why he was able to achieve what he did. In three years he laid the foundation of a religion that would inspire the world, that would change the lives of millions of people. This didn’t just happen. This happened because of his birth as the Son of God, but it was really driven through the sort of person he was. His power was, and continues to be, irresistible. It is a power that draws from us a commitment to a certain way of life. It could well be us saying, ‘Teacher, I will follow you no matter where you go!’

This leads me on to the second aspect I want to highlight, as reflected in verses 21 and 22. *‘Another of his disciples said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.” But Jesus told him, “Follow me now! Let those who are spiritually dead care for their own dead.”’* Now at first glance this might seem a little harsh. I mean who wouldn’t expect to attend the funeral of their own father? Surely you would drop everything in order to attend to this. In fact, it was a sacred duty for Jews to ensure a decent burial for a deceased parent. This is likely

what the disciple, in a roundabout way, was referring to. His father was probably still alive but elderly and the disciple felt a duty to care for him until the time came when he did pass away and he could then make sure that he was fittingly farewelled. But Jesus is saying, 'No, you come with me now!' I think he says this for two reasons. Firstly, because it is human nature that if we put something off once, it highly likely we will do it again. As Robin Williams said in Dead Poets' Society, 'Carpe Diem' or 'Seize the day!' If you want to get something done, there is no time like the present. Secondly, there is no doubt Jesus is talking here about commitment. To follow Jesus calls for a huge commitment. I cannot stress this more highly. It is about making sacrifices. Listen to what Jesus expects from us. *'I say love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you.'* Matthew 5:44. *'Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for.'* Matthew 7:7. The emphasis here is on *'keep on asking.'* *'Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord. How often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No", replied Jesus, "seventy times seven!"'* Matthew 18:21-22. Don't tell me that doesn't call for significant sacrifice. Then there is the exchange between Jesus and the rich man in which Jesus tells him, *'If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.'* Matthew 19:21. A perfect example of making sacrifices in order to follow Jesus.

I could quote many other examples but the message is very clear. The point is this, in order to achieve anything substantial or significant in life, we invariably have to make sacrifices, we almost always have to make a serious commitment. I could talk about marriage. In order for a marriage to work, it calls for commitment, commitment, commitment! A relationship with Jesus is a bit like a marriage – there are many elements that are very much the same. Let me tell you about the albatross, a story that reflects these elements of commitment we are talking about. Most of us have probably not seen an albatross in the flesh, but they are a bird of some majesty. Their family life is fascinating. The albatross mates for life, hence the comparison to a marriage. When the egg is laid, the parents share incubation duties in spells of two to eight days over a period of eleven weeks – one of the longest incubation periods of any bird. When the chick has hatched, the parents take turns at guarding it and feeding it for approximately 300 days. The parents will then leave the colony to spend a year at sea

before returning to breed again. They will go their own separate ways, never meeting up during the year but then they will return to the colony a year later, resume their relationship and breed again.

The story of the albatross is one of commitment and this lovely bird can teach us humans a thing or two about commitment. What an important word that is. Without commitment we cannot hope to succeed, no matter what field of endeavour we are pursuing, no matter what area of our lives we are referring to. In this case we are talking about our spiritual lives, and the same applies. We have to work at our relationship with God – it doesn't just happen. Just as Jesus did, we have to pray, and pray, and pray, and then pray some more. We have to be prepared to make a myriad of sacrifices. We have to be prepared to give, and give, and give. Then, and only then, will we find that true fulfilment that is the reward for a deep and meaningful relationship with God and with Jesus Christ.

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