

MARK 3:13-19
JESUS CALLS; WE FOLLOW?

“It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community... He committed the entire work of salvation to that community... The actual, visible community, a company of men and women with ascertainable names and addresses is the Church of God.” (L Newbigin *Household of God*) I love that quote. I don't think it says everything about the Church, but it contains something very profound that we too often forget. The Church is people; we are the Church. We show by language we use that we forget it: 'have you done this? Have you done that? You should be doing...'; as either I am the Church, or the church is some impersonal entity out there. but 'we' are the Church together! Jesus has created a church that is a group of people, a visible community of which we are a part; some more committed parts than others, perhaps, but a visible community, a people. Think about this: why does it matter so much that we remember that?

It all began in the gospels with a small group of people, 12 in all, that Jesus called to be His disciples; 12 people perhaps to reflect a connection with the past and the 12 tribes of Israel; it is a significant bible number! It was certainly a small number and today we'll look at the stories of Jesus calling these people and try to see what these stories show us about our life and faith and our relationship with Jesus and with one another. We know their names; we know some of their stories, but not all of them; we can trace some of them all way through the gospels and into the later history of the Church, but others remains in the shadows! But they all had a part to play in the story. This is the beginning of the thing we call Church! Paul says that the Thessalonians were the model church; they were commended for their faith, love and hope and the fruits of these qualities; to be the model Church, they were modeling themselves on Jesus; they had imitated the apostles and followed Jesus.

Last week, we glanced at the story of Levi, or Matthew, as he is perhaps better known. He was sitting in his toll booth beside the road from Damascus to Capernaum, when Jesus came past. Had Jesus met Levi before? Had Levi been in the audience for one of Jesus' teaching events or miracles? We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus said to Levi *“Follow me”* and he did. *“Levi got...” (2:14)* Someone said “the only thing he took with him from his old occupation was his pen and ink” (Alexander. Whyte) He went on to become better known as Matthew the gospel-writer. This reflects the earlier story of Jesus' calling Andrew and Peter, James and John; He came to them with the same words: *“follow me!”* People gave up their fishing boats, their toll-booths, their other ways of life to follow Jesus; so began this visible community of people following Jesus that we have inherited and that we call Church.

Mark goes on in chapter 3 to tell us how Jesus put this little group together. *“Jesus called...” (3:13f)* There are 12 names, 12 people who are called and chosen to be the centre of this new community. By choosing 12, Jesus seems to be making a statement; there were 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament; these 12 tribes were the people of God; is he saying that here, in these 12 people, is the core of the new people of God? It would seem so! There were others who followed Him and we read of their stories in the gospels: some women were obviously significant people in their little community; others who are not named here; some who are named here, but of whom we know little or nothing. These 12 people are the core, the new beginning, the new community with Jesus at its centre and they will learn to follow Him and be the people that He wants them to be in next few months and years.

Called to follow: what is our first calling? – “*that they...*” (3:14) The notion of ‘following’ in the Bible often means “to walk with someone”. So in the Old Testament “*Enoch walked with God*” By New Testament times, the notion of following had changed a little because of the relationship between rabbi and disciple meant that the superior would walk ahead and the inferior follows on behind. The disciples were called to be with Jesus, to spend time in His presence, to develop a relationship with Him based on love and trust. Being with Him they would listen to Him teach, they would see Him do miracles, they would watch the way in which He behaved, they would observe and admire the qualities of the man and by being in the presence of the perfect man, they would see what being human was really all about.

Discipleship is at the heart of being a Christian. It simply means learning. It means being someone who learns from the Master! Our first calling as Christians is to walk with Jesus. That cannot be the same as Levi did, because we can’t see Jesus, but our first calling is still to walk with Jesus and to do as Levi and the others did, to listen to Jesus teach, to watch Him behave, to pick up His attitudes and learn to be like Him. We do that by reading the Bible, praying and coming to Church and imbibing what these teach us; we can’t walk with Jesus in any other way; we will never fulfil the very first and simplest part of being Jesus’ people without the Bible, prayer and Church. We are called to walk with Jesus through life. ‘Following’ means learning to be like Jesus. We could become avid Bible-readers and attenders of Church and listeners to sermons, but life remain untouched. Walking with Jesus is not about accumulating knowledge that you can quote at the drop of a hat, but is about learning to be like Him in the actual way that we live our lives.

Called to serve – “and that...” (3:14f) The disciples were called to serve Jesus in some way or another. For them, service would mean preaching the good news about Jesus and having the authority to drive out demons and heal people. That was service appropriate to their time and their society’s needs. In early days of Church, the apostles were preachers and teachers and others cared for the poor and needy; these were ways of service to Jesus appropriate to their society and their time

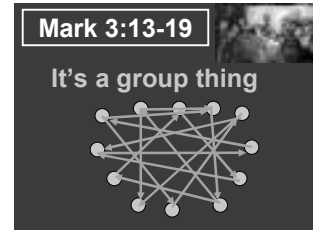
We are called to serve Jesus. For us, that will mean totally different things from the ways in which the disciples served. Some are still called to be preachers and teachers of the good news, but many of us are not. But we are all called to serve Jesus in some way or another. It may be some kind of service within the life of the Church and if you’re new to Church and would like to talk about what that might mean, then come and talk to me. We also serve Jesus in other ways, in the life of the community, in our daily work, in the way we help our neighbours, in all kinds of ways. Wherever we see a need and we have ability and the time to do something about that need, perhaps that kind of service in Jesus’ calling for your life. It is a great thing that we know little about the future life and service of at least half of these 12 names: Jesus knew them, He knew they would serve; even if no-one else knows what we do, we are still called to serve.

It is a group thing – What would you have seen if you had been standing at the side of the road as Jesus walked past? You would have seen Jesus at the front, striding out, perhaps, on His way to a new town. Behind Him, you would have seen what? A group of at least 12 people walking behind Him, talking to one another, at least once arguing, asking questions of one another, asking questions of Jesus. These were not 12 people who walked with Jesus as individuals, separately, only relating to Jesus once in a while; this was a group of people who related to Jesus and related to one another and learned from one another and from rubbing up against other people. It was a group thing.



The great challenge for Church is to learn to be that community. The community with Jesus at the centre diagrammatically might well have looked like this, with Jesus at the centre and little dots relating to Him and a little to one another. But in terms of the visible community that is Church today, the shape is different; it is much more like this with

all the dots relating to one another in exactly same way, all of us as learners together, loving and caring for one another, supporting one another. This is why groups like the Guild and the Men's Breakfast (men eating their way to fellowship) and group prayer times and Bible studies are so important; this is why conversations with other Christians matter so much, and why tea & coffee after the service is such a good thing, and why the meal at the AGM is a top priority – because these are all signs of and opportunities for building the group thing, building our community life.



One of the worst things we have done in Church is to turn faith into an individualist thing. People say 'I have my faith' and by that they mean that they don't need to come to Church or read the Bible or learn any more from a preacher or any other Christian. It's an old illustration now, but still perfect: with a coal fire, from time to time a piece of coal would fall out of the fire into the hearth and if that coal was left, what would happen? It would go out; it would stop burning, and its fire would die. Detach ourselves from the visible community that is Church and that is what will happen; for people who are no longer able to come to Church, we need to work hard to support them in their faith. Christianity is not an individualist faith in which we simply relate to God and Jesus on our own and in our own way. Jesus calls us to be community, together. The tragedy of modern life is that people are under pressure in so many ways and something has to go and so often Church is the thing that goes and just at the time when we most need to be part of a community that will support us and care for us, we begin to drift, for genuine reasons at time; but take care, because for many who drift like this, they never find the way back! Let's not be lots of little isolated individuals struggling along in faith and life, but let's be a genuine community of faith and find ways of expressing that community for everyone.

We are called to follow; called to serve; and are called to do this together. That's the Church! A visible community of people like you and me, with names and addresses, called to walk with Jesus, called to serve Jesus, called to be part of a community. All of His grace; we are not worthy of such a great privilege as this, but Jesus has called us as we are to be His people and to give expression to that together. It is a huge challenge: to walk with Jesus, listening to Him, learning from Him; to find ways of serving Him, seeing work as service; to understand Christian community, Church as a group thing, not just "me and my faith"! Jesus simply says "*Follow me!*"