Sunday 6th March - Matthew 8:18-27

Welcome

Family News/notices (inc birthdays)

Prayer – Lord as we come to you today to worship you, would you still our hearts from those things that have been bothering us throughout the week, open our minds to hear your voice; may we know your presence in this place, and glorify your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

77 Crown him with many crowns

Prayer requests, prayer box – praise the Lord of Life, the Lord of Love, the Lord of peace, the Lord of the years. As that Lord we come before you to pray for those people on our hearts and in our minds…

Lord we pray for the situations in the world that concern us. Perhaps you want to just call out a name, a place, a situation to bring before God.

Especially Ukraine. Pray for peace.



Lord we pray for covid which is ongoing throughout the world; as we lean to live with it would you give us wisdom and care for one another. We pray for your church throughout the world meeting today, would you bless, strengthen and guide it, to do your will and share your gospel. We pray especially for this church as we have our church meeting this afternoon, may we meet in love and attentiveness, may we be guided by you to bring a blessing to this community. Amen.

633 You laid aside your majesty

We’ve been talking in our Bible studies about what a leader looks like. We know, don’t we, that Jesus drew a distinction in the Bible between earthly leaders who ‘lord it’ over their people, who claim the power and prestige, and his style of leadership, which was service and sacrifice.

And we might quite like Jesus’ style of leadership. We might like to follow someone who isn’t dictating but is serving, who leads by example, who teaches us and helps us as we go through our lives. But before we jump into that we’re just going to have an exercise on following for a moment.

Play a game – follow my leader

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPpd-6X3tEo> while we play (Sister Act version)

Who didn’t join in (or stopped half way)? Why?

First part of reading: Matt 8:18-22

Here we hit a bit of a problem. Not only is Jesus not a dictator, not looking for money, and power, and honour, and glory; but he doesn’t promise that to his followers either. The leader who has nothing isn’t likely to lead his followers to earthly gain. We have to appreciate that this first guy, a teacher in the law, wanted to follow him, a less educated carpenter, in the first place. If Jesus had been a normal person it would have been an honour for this teacher to be admiring him, to want to follow him. But Jesus needed him to know that it wasn’t going to be all wonderful. He didn’t make promises, didn’t try to persuade the man to come, he told it like it is – the man would be following a leader who, while he might be popular, had nothing. And if you’re going to follow him, it’s going to get difficult.

And this other guy, described as a ‘disciple’, also wants to follow him – but not yet. “Let me bury my father,” he says. Most commentators on the Bible will say that his father probably wasn’t dead. “When my father isn’t around, when he’s dead and buried, then I’ll come and follow you.” Maybe we all have things that we could use in that way. They’re not bad things. This guy isn’t making excuses per se, he’s not finding reasons not to follow – it’s quite possible he wanted to look out for his family. But Jesus knows, more than his listeners do, that he’s not actually going to be around forever. His time is limited. The opportunity that this disciple has to follow him, isn’t something that can wait for a more convenient time. My commentary says that this is “a warning against missing the boat”. I don’t know if that’s a deliberate choice of words but it’s a very appropriate one, as we’ll see in a minute. But the point is, sometimes decisions have to be made **now**, not put off until some indefinite day in the future, and the time when Jesus is calling you isn’t a time for procrastination.

I struggled this morning to find hymns. Funnily enough, we don’t often sing about how much Jesus asks us to give up! We don’t sing about missed opportunities. But both of these are realities in Jesus’ life and discipleship. There’s a song, ‘take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee’. We know that one. Take my voice and let me sing always, only, for my king… take my silver and my gold… take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine… All good stuff, do we really mean it? Someone once said Christians don’t tell lies, they sing them. We say we will give everything to Jesus but almost on the understanding that he isn’t really going to ask us to, right? I’ll go wherever you want as long as what you want is for me to stay here!

So we are going to sing again, and I think what we need is a bit of strength and courage to follow, so let’s sing:

37 Be Bold

We’re going to continue with our second reading (dramatized): Matt 8:23-27

Now I really should be a bit more organised with my sermon schedule. Because everything I might want to say about this I said when I preached a few weeks ago on Psalm 46: God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

Wes and I heard a sermon on this at his church a couple of weeks ago, which happened to be the day after Storm Eunice. Now it’s hard to think of anything more scary than being out in the sea in a fishing boat in a storm, but this maybe comes close: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj5gUIVtG4U> (1:48-2:58)

I wonder, if Jesus had been sleeping on that plane, whether people would have been waking him up? “We’re going to crash!”

I’m reminded of a joke. A priest and a taxi driver arrived at the gates of heaven at the same time. And Peter was there, and he welcomed them both. He gives the taxi driver this ornate robe, and gold crown: ‘come in, come in, bless you, it’s so good to see you.’ The priest thinks, ‘this is alright, I can’t wait to see what I get.’ And Peter hands him a plain robe and a wooden crown: ‘come in, come in, bless you, it’s so good to see you.’ The priest looks at him. ‘What’s going on? I’ve been a priest for years, I gave my life to the church, how comes I get a wooden crown and he gets a gold one?’ Peter answers him, “You see, up here we work on results. While you were preaching, people slept. But while he was driving, people prayed.”

It isn’t theologically accurate when it comes to its portrayal of heaven. But we do, don’t we? Even those people who don’t normally think of God suddenly remember him in an emergency. How much more then did the disciples rely on Jesus when things got difficult?

They left him as long as they could. He was tired, he needed to rest, they tried to look after him. But it got to a point where these experienced fishermen realised they needed to wake him up. “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” And he rebukes them, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?”

It seems a bit unfair, really. They’ve woken him up, haven’t they? They’ve asked him to save them? What’s lacking in faith then? Anyone would be afraid in those physical situations! I can’t quite grasp what was so wrong, to be honest with you. Perhaps Jesus realises they don’t actually expect him to do anything. Perhaps he realises that they only woke him up so they would have another hand on the ropes, rather than waiting for a miracle. They were certainly amazed when the miracle came. They had seen his power over disease and sickness, but the thought of his power over the tremendous forces of nature was just incredible to them.

I can’t help wondering whether they could have woken him up before. When it started to get a bit choppy. But then, why would they? These were experienced fishermen, they were used to dealing with a bit of wind. And the wind picked up a bit more – ok, we can deal with it still. And a bit more – yeah, it’s getting a bit hard now, but we’re too busy trying to still deal with it on our own to go and ask Jesus. Until the point when they say, ‘Actually, no, we can’t do this.’ That’s the point when the aeroplane gives up on the landing and goes back up again, isn’t it. ‘Nope, it’s all too much now.’ And **then** they ask Jesus.

Why is that? Why do we always wait until the very last moment? Why do we keep trying to deal with things in our own strength rather than just going to God when it starts to get a bit choppy? There’s a line in a song that I love that says, ‘when we’ve reached the end of our earthly resources, the Father’s full giving is only begun.’ It’s as though we have to get to that point of acknowledging that we can’t do it, for God to step in and do it for us. Perhaps this is why the Pharisees had such trouble with Jesus’ teaching – because while they still thought they could rely on their own behaviour, they couldn’t accept what God had to offer. And what he had to offer was more than just ‘a bit of help’. It was a whole revolution in the situation. Jesus didn’t just pull on some ropes and help them to handle the boat. He calmed the entire storm.

The world feels like it’s in a bit of a storm at the moment doesn’t it? The war in Ukraine feels a bit close to home in a way that those in Afghanistan, the Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia may not. Sometimes it seems like God must be asleep! But we know he is not. We know he is there, he is mighty and strong to save; he is our refuge and strength. The world may be in trouble, life may be difficult, but God is present and working – and Jesus isn’t our last resort to save us when all else fails – he is there **all** the time. Just turn to him.

Let’s sing again:

44 Blessed Assurance

Before the final section of the service this morning I want to tell you something about the Gospels. They are, in the main, a **collection** of stories about Jesus. Stories that would have been told, and retold, and maybe some of them written down. They are **not** usually meant to be read as one story from start to finish. The most accurate in that sense is thought to be Luke, who worked slightly more as a historian; Matthew, Mark and John tended to have their own reasons for writing and would arrange things to suit those reasons. So while the **stories** are true, what I’m saying is they didn’t necessarily happen in the order they are recorded, but are put together in a certain way for a particular purpose.

Luke has these 2 stories quite definitely separated. Jesus calms the storm, and some time later has that conversation about the cost of being a disciple. But Matthew places them together, and in such a way that they are definitely **meant** to be together. They don’t just happen to come one after the other; the first reading we had was introduced with ‘Jesus gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake’; the second reading talks about that crossing. Matthew wants us to see this as part of the same story. So what is the message he wants us to understand?

I wonder what those two men who initially wanted to follow Jesus would have thought when the storm came up. I wonder if they, too, would have thought that those in the boat were going to drown. If they had gone with him, they’d have been in that boat. They would have endured that storm, that danger, that fear. Jesus had said there would be a cost to following him: straight away here is a cost. Perhaps the teacher of the law thought, “I did well not to go there! That would have been the shortest discipleship ever before I ended up at the bottom of the sea!” Perhaps the disciple who wanted to wait thought “That was a close call, my father could have been burying me!” – or perhaps he thought, “I’ve really missed out now. No second chances.” Both these men (we assume) chose not to follow Jesus. And in doing so, they avoided being caught in the storm. They could carry on with their simple lives, with their families, in comfort.

But they also avoided the miracle. They never experienced the salvation the disciples found when they gave up trying to do it on their own and put their faith in Jesus. They never saw the power of God at work in their lives, and what that meant about who Jesus was. They never got to realise that even though Jesus might lead them into difficulties he would be in there with them, and would be faithful to them, and would bring them through it.

They never realised all this because one thought it would be too difficult, and the other was putting it off.

They wanted to follow, but those of us who want to follow Jesus must expect to do what Jesus did. That’s the point of following, isn’t it? Jesus’ life wasn’t one of glory and honour, it was one of hardship and sacrifice. It was a life of service and the cross. It was a life of heading into the storms, but trusting in God. And that is what we are called to as well.

And just as Jesus responded to people in the ‘here and now’, just as he never said, ‘come back later’ to those who came to him, we can’t do that either. We can’t say, “Yeah, I want to go to church but it’s not convenient right now.” “Yeah, I want to serve you but I’m a bit busy, maybe when I retire.” Or even, “Yeah, I want to follow you, but let me enjoy myself first.” “I want to be baptised, to have a new life in Christ, but let me get some sinning out of the way just so I don’t miss out on anything.” Or even, “Let me get my life sorted first. I’m not good enough to follow you, come back when I’ve improved.”

It doesn’t work like that. For a start, what hope have we got of improving without him? But also, the opportunity is now. Jesus stands in front of us, now. Not offering a life of ease and comfort, but offering a life of hard, rewarding discipleship. Inviting us to head off into the storm with him, and in doing so to experience the presence and power of God in the most difficult of situations. What are we going to do? Will we respond to him, get on board and face the wind and the waves? Or will we miss the boat?

…

I want to just note again, that the Bible says that those men were disciples. Not part of the twelve, but they were people who had been following Jesus and learning from him. And yet at this point they faced a decision: would they follow, or had they reached their limit?

I want to ask you, then – wherever you are on your walk with Jesus – are you prepared to take the next step? That step will be different for each of us. It may be a step towards asking him to be Lord of your life. It may be a step towards baptism, or church member ship. It may be a step towards a deeper discipleship. It may be a step towards something he is calling you to do. It will not always be easy. It might involve leaving things behind that you’d rather not leave behind. But the opportunity is there, now, as Jesus stands before you.

I invite you in a time of quiet just to listen to God. What does following him look like to you? What does he ask of you? What challenges does that present? Are you willing to go where he has called you?

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If you think God is speaking to you this morning, if there is something specific you would like to talk about or you would like prayer for, please come and grab me after the service; I’m around all day.

But let us pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you for this story which reminds us that in the difficulties of discipleship, you have promised to be with us. As we follow you wherever you lead, may we know the power of your Spirit at work within us, granting us your peace in the storm. Would you help us to have faith in you when the world around us gets too much; actually, would you help us to turn to you **before** the world gets too much. We praise you for your power over the storms of our lives and the storms of our world, and ask again for your kingdom of peace and justice to reign; over us, as individuals; over this church; over this nation; over this world. In your holy name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

1120 Will you come and follow me

Let’s close with the Lord’s prayer

May the peace of the Lord go with you, wherever he may send you. May he guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm. May he bring you home rejoicing at the wonders he has shown you. May he bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors. Amen.