

ON THE BEACH

Follow Me

I am going to ask you to think very carefully about the words I read this morning. They are, by now I hope, very familiar words to you, but I want you to think about them as if you were Peter. Obviously, this is a work of your imagination, because, quite simply, you are not Peter. But, just for a moment this morning, allow your imagination to run and as I read: imagine you are Peter. Peter is the disciple we probably know best and by this point in his story, we know quite a bit about Peter. About three years before the story we have spent so much time in over the last few weeks, Peter was on the beach again, fishing.

Mathew records what happened this way.

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mathew 4 v 18-20)

Jesus spoke two words that would change Peter’s life: “Follow Me!” Remarkably Peter followed. He left everything he knew to follow this man called Jesus. Jesus’ invitation to ‘follow me’ was not so much an invitation to go to a certain place, or any place. It was more an invitation to be with him, to go wherever he went, to do whatever he did. Jesus extended an invitation – “Follow Me.” Peter responded and followed. And what an adventure the choice to follow Jesus turned out to be.

Peter, in following Jesus, experienced a roller coaster of emotions, no doubt. He stood amazed at a wedding as Jesus turned ordinary water into the best wine anybody had ever tasted. He watched aghast as Jesus not only spoke to, but asked the help of a Samaritan woman, and then watched in bewilderment as she invited the whole town to come and meet Jesus. Peter was a witness to the healing of many ordinary people, some who had been ill for years. Peter stood stunned, and perhaps a little embarrassed, as Jesus fed a crowd he’d asked the disciples to feed, using only 5 loaves and 2 fish. And if that wasn’t enough for Peter, that night, for a moment at least, Peter walked on the water

in the midst of a storm, towards Jesus, until fear got the better of him, and he began to sink, only to be rescued by Jesus reaching towards him.

But it hadn't been easy or plain sailing following Jesus: Jesus' teaching was sometimes hard and challenging. John records that his teaching was so hard many disciples gave up and went home but the twelve stayed loyal to Jesus. Peter pledged his commitment, but perhaps he had his doubts too – after all he was only human. Fishing he knew – following Jesus was full of unknown.

Jesus gave glimpses of a bigger picture than the one they saw in front of them. But, perhaps like you and me, they were slow to grasp what Jesus was really saying. Jesus could see a future that Peter had no idea about. Peter was a history maker in the making, but he didn't know that.

Whatever his thoughts and reservations about following this unpredictable Jesus, Peter stayed. He followed. And now, here he is again, on the beach with Jesus, and Jesus is about to extend the same invitation again to Peter: "Follow Me!" In that moment Peter holds all his experience of following Jesus, the good and exhilarating moments, and the hard times of challenge and bewilderment, and the hardest trial of denial and betrayal.

So, if you were Peter, how would you respond?

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee.^[a] It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus^[b]), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.^[c] ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus Reinstates Peter

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to

indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me! (John 21 v 1-19)

If you were Peter, how would you feel as Jesus invites you once again to follow me?

One thing was for sure – following Jesus from now on would be different than before. Before, Jesus was present, physically present with his disciples, to follow him literally meant just that – to follow him. They would go where he went, be with him wherever he was. They didn't have to think too much about it – they just had to follow.

They would do what he told them – and since he was there with them, they could hear what he said. Jesus spoke their language and they could understand what he was saying. They were close enough to see with their own eyes what Jesus was doing and what he had done – they didn't need anyone to tell them. But Jesus had gone away once – and that turned out to be way more difficult than any of them had thought or anticipated. In fact, it still seemed so very, very wrong.

Jesus kept talking about going away again – and this time for a long time. Following Jesus when he wasn't physically present, when he wasn't there by their side, when he wasn't able to take control of the situation – what would that be like? To follow Jesus from this moment on, when Jesus invites Peter again to follow him, would be a new way to follow.

Peter would follow Jesus like we do now! Peter would have to learn about prayer – communicating with Jesus when he isn't with you face to face. Peter would have to learn to trust that his friend and teacher still heard him and still had his best interests at heart. Peter would have to face the truth that he was to walk into a challenging future without Jesus physically at his side – a walk of faith.

Jesus had told him the Holy Spirit would be with him all the way but, perhaps, in that moment on the beach, Peter would rather have Jesus with him all the way. And, perhaps, in his humanness, Peter feared he had lost Jesus once, and was now about to lose him a second time.

Peter was about to become the leader of a small band of apostles. His mission, if that's what it was, would look and feel very different. Peter had known times when he was walking on the water. To get to the beach this time though, he'd

had to jump in and wade through the water. And, maybe following Jesus, the walk of faith, is like that. The truth is, it changes – the walk of faith.

Following Jesus I am, in many ways very different to Peter. In other ways, perhaps, I am remarkably similar.

I didn't, like Peter, have a dramatic start to my life of faith, to following Jesus. Peter on the beach, heard the invitation: "Follow Me!" and left everything. It didn't happen that way for me. Maybe you know what it was like for Peter because you heard the call of God, and everything changed. I grew up in a Christian home, I'm the son of a preacher man! My worldview has always been a Christian worldview and as a young boy I desperately wanted to know this Jesus whom Peter followed, and I wanted to follow too.

I lapped up church and everything it had to offer. I loved to sing in the choir – and even enjoyed wearing choir robes, until the church decided to have a music group instead of a choir. I tried to learn all I could about this Jesus, the one we read about in the Bible and were taught about in church. By the time I was a young adult I was pretty sure what I knew about God and faith, and following Jesus. I got invited to be part of a beach mission and I was happy to talk about what I knew and understood.

But I met people who challenged me and thought differently. I began to think about my dad and why God would take him away from me when we were both so young. Questions began to rise – big questions – about what kind of God this God really was. Then I went to Theological college where one of my tutors told us his job was to plant little bombs in our brains – which he did remarkably well.

I went into theological college thinking I had most of my theology sewn up, and came out wondering if I had any of it sewn up. As a preacher I am committed to preach only that of which I am convinced – and in some ways that is now harder than it's ever been.

I have by no means lost my faith, but both I and what I now think I am convinced of, has changed. I am not the same person I was when I was young, or at theological college, or when I began to preach. This last year has been particularly challenging, one which has caused me many times to wonder about what following Jesus means. And, just to reassure you, if that's what you need, I am as secure in what I believe as I've ever been. It's just that what I believe now, is not what I have always believed, or believed at different times

in life. Life has changed me, following God has changed me. Not only do our circumstances change, but so do we.

The Peter on the beach after breakfast over a charcoal fire, was not the same Peter as the one Jesus met three years earlier. And yet Jesus' invitation, knowing all he knows about Peter, is simply: "Follow Me!"

Perhaps, today, now, in these moments, Jesus says the same thing to you. "Follow Me!" With everything you know, with everything that's changed, in the light of who you are right now, in these moments, how will you respond?

On the beach Jesus gives Peter a heads up about a challenging future. He doesn't promise following him will be a beach, but he doesn't promise he will walk with him.

We like to talk about the beginning of the Christian life – especially if it was dramatic. Perhaps though, we should talk more about how we might end the Christian life. I wonder how many of you have heard of Billy Graham? I expect most, if not all of you. I wonder if you've heard of Chuck Templeton or Bron Clifford?

The year is 1945 and all three of these young men in their 20's are packing in the crowds as they preach the Gospel. Templeton was described by one seminary president as the most gifted and talented young preacher in America at that time. Clifford was believed by others to be the most gifted and powerful preacher the church had seen in centuries. These young guys had remarkable ministries. How come then, the only name we know is that of Billy Graham?

By 1950 Chuck Templeton had left the ministry to pursue a career in radio and T.V. and as a newspaper columnist. He had decided he was no longer a believer in Christ in the orthodox sense of the term. He no longer believed the validity of the claims of Jesus.

By 1954, Bron Clifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health and his life. Alcohol and financial mismanagement had been his undoing. He left his wife and two children with Down's Syndrome, and at the age of 35 he died of cirrhosis of the liver in a run down motel on the edge of Amarillo. He was buried in a cemetery for the poor because some ministers clubbed together to give him a proper resting place.

Billy Graham died in 2018, at the age of 99, having recorded his last sermon at the age of 95.

In 1945 three young men were blessed with immense gifts and huge promise. Within 10 years only one was still following Jesus. Perhaps it's not so important how you start the life of faith, but rather how you finish it.

On the beach, Jesus invites Peter, once again, to follow him. Peter chose to follow. He chose to walk into the unknown, the uncertainty of the future because he knew enough about Jesus to follow him.

I too, have decided to follow Jesus from here to the finish line. Jesus extends his invitation to you: "Follow Me!"

What will you do?

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