

Christ's Insistent Call: 'Walk with me'

10th March 2019

The first in a series of six Lent Addresses on Discipleship given by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, during Lent 2019:

Prior Reading: [Luke 5:27-31](#) and [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 39-76](#)



The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer at a Confessing Church underground seminary 1937

'He got up, left everything and followed Jesus'. Jesus saw Levi sitting at his roadside collection point. Rather than pay the required toll, Jesus simply told the tax collector to come and follow him. And Levi got up, left behind his workplace and that day's takings, and followed Jesus. Later that day, he invited Jesus to his own home, and gave a banquet for the man who saw him, noticed him and called him to follow him. And he invited all his former colleagues to join in the feast.

In the Scriptures, the call to follow Jesus is immediate and direct. Jesus comes to a workplace – the road toll station, the boat yard – sees and recognises those who are working there, and calls them to follow him. And the people whom he calls either leave all that they have behind and follow immediately, as in the case of Simon, Andrew, James and John and Levi, or they find reasons for themselves to reject that call and remain behind.

Those who follow, follow joyfully. They may leave behind their family and their livelihood, their business interests, but they follow with great expectation and joy. Some, like Levi, give a feast to celebrate their changed lives. Others, like the fishermen Simon and Andrew, put all they have in service of Jesus, turning their boats into floating pulpits, for example. Those who follow are changed, and let go of all they had, in order to walk with Jesus.

Those who remain behind, like the rich man whom Jesus will call to follow, and command to sell all his possessions, are often deeply shaken by their decision not to follow Jesus' call. The rich man wept over his inability to give up and let go of his past life, and follow into an unknown future. His familiar circumstances would have remained the same; there would have been little change to the external rhythms of his life. Except for the fact that he had been seen by Jesus, and heard and rejected his invitation to follow.

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In this series of Lent addresses we will be thinking about what it means to hear and respond to Jesus' call today. We will be looking at the demands made by Jesus on his followers – the things he tells us to do that are life-giving and life-lasting, and those things he tells us to give up that we need to leave behind in our journey with him. We will be looking at how it is that Jesus calls women, men and children today – the ways in which we may come to know that, like Levi, we have been noticed by him, and been invited to come and follow him. And finally, we will be looking at what it means to know Jesus' call resonate in us in such a profound way that we may say that we belong to him so intimately as to be members of his body.

We will do this by examining the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, as recorded by St Luke, and by looking at the writings of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 75 years ago this year, Bonhoeffer was transferred from prison to a Nazi Concentration Camp; punishment for his personal association with those who had plotted to kill Adolf Hitler and overthrow his regime. He would be executed in the final days of the second world war. Just as Luke's story of Jesus can speak to us today with great immediacy, so Bonhoeffer's reflections on what it means to be a follower of Jesus also can speak to us as powerfully today, as they did when he first composed them in the last year before the Second World War.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections were written for a group of protestant clergy who, like him, were opposed to the rule of fascism. From the outset of Hitler's coming to power, Bonhoeffer had seen the role of the church as leading a prophetic opposition to injustice. It was not good enough simply to take care of those who had fallen foul of the regime. It was the role of the church to stop the terror of fascism altogether. The church must not only 'bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam the spoke of the wheel altogether', Bonhoeffer believed. And the publication of his *Discipleship*, a series of lectures delivered at his underground seminary on a suburban estate near Stettin/Szczecin, held up a mirror.

'Faith no longer meant keeping quiet and waiting', Bonhoeffer wrote, 'but going with Christ. Now all bridges had to be burned and the step taken to enter into endless insecurity, in order to know what Jesus demands and Jesus gives'. And just as each one of us has to discern how to follow the call of Christ, so the church also has to discern what it means to go with Christ and speak out boldly in the face of injustice and oppression, Bonhoeffer believed. Later in this series of addresses we will be looking again at what it means for the church as a whole to follow Jesus' call, what it may mean for us as a community to follow Christ. Today we will be concentrating on what it means for each one of us to step out in faith where Jesus leads.

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer that stepping out in faith to follow where Christ led, meant abandoning alternative careers in England and the United States and instead returning to Germany to step into leadership of the Confessing Church and membership of the Nazi resistance. For Levi that stepping out in faith where Christ led, meant abandoning his livelihood as a toll collector, and literally following Jesus. For both the call to discipleship lead to the acceptance of an unsettled, uncertain life. For us all the call to follow Christ means to take the first step: to get up and walk with Jesus.

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Leaving behind the toll booth and the relative certainty and routine it symbolises may seem a simple step. But it is a profound break with the past. Levi turns his back on his old business. Indeed, he gathers his former associates around him in order to enable them also to experience the life-changing call of Christ. 'A call to discipleship immediately creates a new situation', Bonhoeffer explains: 'staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude one another. The tax collector had to leave his booth, and Peter his nets, to follow Jesus'. We cannot both remain behind in our old lives and follow Jesus at the same time. We are called to leaving behind all and to step into the unknown.

Following Jesus means getting up and walking with Jesus, not sitting still. In the days before the Messiah came, Bonhoeffer explained to his students, faith may well have meant staying put, doing good and waiting. 'But now Jesus was there; now his call came. Now faith no longer meant keeping quiet and waiting, but going in discipleship with him'. There is nothing wrong in principle with just

getting on with things as they had been. But that's not discipleship. The story of the rich man, who was unable to take up Christ's call, and instead remained behind grieving, makes that clear: 'Christ's call to discipleship dissolves all ties for the sake of the unique commitment to Jesus Christ'.

If sitting still and just getting on with things as they are is not discipleship, what does discipleship look like? 'As long as Levi sits in the tax collector's booth and Peter at his nets, they would do their work honestly and loyally, they would have old or new knowledge about God', Bonhoeffer explains. 'But if they want to learn to believe in God, they have to follow the Son of God incarnate and walk with him'. And that is just as true today, as it was for Peter and Levi. We actually need to get up and walk with Jesus, in order to be his disciples.

Before we get up and act, though, we first need to listen. Listen to Jesus' words to you as written in the Scriptures, and spoken to you by other followers of Jesus, the members of Christ's body. Come to worship. Be confident that Jesus will speak to you through the readings, the hymns, the sermon and our sharing in bread and wine. Be prepared to listen to what Jesus says. And then – and this, the story of the rich young man suggests, is the most difficult part of the process of discipleship – follow up on what Jesus says to you.

Have faith to act on what it is that Jesus calls you to do, have faith to heed that call, and take the first step into discipleship by committing to walk with Jesus. Bonhoeffer put it like this: 'The first step is crucial. It is qualitatively different from all others that follow. The first step of obedience has to lead Peter away from his nets and out of the boat'. The first step leads Levi away from the toll booth and his past life. The first step leads us away from our preoccupation with our own lives to life with Jesus.

In the end, the only way in which we can become disciples is by hearing, and by believing in, Jesus' call. If the tax collector had had a conversation with Jesus and remained behind at his toll booth, he would have undoubtedly had better insights into his life, Bonhoeffer warns: 'but he would not have recognised him as the one Lord, into whose had he should entrust his whole life. He would not have learnt faith'.

Only by listening to Jesus' word and acting on it, Levi is able to leave behind his past and follow. By listening and acting, by following and accepting Christ's insistent call as true for him, Levi is able to believe and obey, and in turn is given faith and a framework for his life as a follower. 'He got up, left everything, and followed him', Luke tells us.

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And that is all there is to the first step on our journeys of faith: when we listen to Jesus' word, we can hear his will. And when we act on what he wills for us, we may learn to believe. And when we believe, we may step out in faith, ready to follow where he tells us to go. I give thanks that this call is extended to you and me today. And I encourage you in the week ahead to do three things:

- Think about what it is that you may need to do in order to hear Jesus' word more clearly? Do you need help in understanding the Scriptures? Do you spend enough time reading the Scriptures during the week? Or do you perhaps need to join a Bible Study group to help you hear and explore Jesus' word?
- Think about what it is that you may need to do in order to believe that Jesus speaks to you today? Do you need to spend more time listening, rather than talking to God? Do you take time to pray and sit with God during the week? Or perhaps do you need to commit to praying in a group with others?
- Think about what it is that you may need to do in order to respond to what Jesus asks you to do? Do you perhaps need to talk with others about how they have responded to God's call in their lives? Are there things that hold you back from following? Are there things you need to pray for to help you to listen to and follow Jesus?

'What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all', Bonhoeffer encourages us. 'Those called leave everything they have, not in order to do something valuable.

Instead, they do it simply for the sake of the call itself, because otherwise they could not walk behind Jesus'. Jesus calls us to listen, follow and walk with him. And I pray that we might hear him call us and help us follow him today.

Bonhoeffer quotations from: [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship](#), Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, eds. John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003)

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Study Questions

1. Read Luke 5:27 – 32
2. Luke 5:28 tells us that Levi “got up, left everything, and followed Jesus.”
 - (a) In what sense did Levi “leave everything”?
 - (b) What does “leaving everything” mean for those who would be Jesus’ disciples today?
3. Immediately after following Jesus:
 - (a) what did Levi do?
 - (b) who did he draw into his newfound influence of Jesus?
 - (c) In what way(s) should we mirror this action if we are to follow Jesus? Discuss in the group some practical ways to do this.
4. Why were the Pharisees and Scribes upset with Jesus (verse 30)?
5. What was Jesus’ response to the Pharisees and Scribes? What insight can we learn from his response for our own time?
6. What are the challenges in this passage for us today? Is there a cost in following Jesus? Discuss!

Questions posed by the Dean at the end of his sermon:

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Prayer

*Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives: give us discernment to hear your word, grace to relinquish our tasks, and courage to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead, so that the voice of your gospel may reach to the ends of the earth. **Amen***