

Following Christ's Call: 'Do this and you will live'

17th March 2019

The second 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 10.25-37](#) and [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, pp. 66-76](#)



The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer with his friend and later biographer Eberhard Bethge

Last week we looked at how people are called by Christ. We looked at the story of the tax collector Levi, who was called by Jesus to come, and follow. And saw how Levi just left behind his tax station, that day's taking and his paperwork, and followed Jesus. We looked at what was required to hear Jesus call to us today, thought about how we today can hear Jesus speak to us with the same immediacy as Levi would have experienced his life-changing call. We thought about setting aside time in our day to listen to Jesus' word to us, through our reading or hearing of the Scriptures, through our prayerful listening, and through our own sharing in fellowship.

We heard from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was placed in a concentration camp 75 years ago this year for his membership of the German resistance, that all that was required to follow Jesus was to get up and walk after him. We read Bonhoeffer's insight that, rather than being easy, this getting up and walking with Jesus may well be a difficult process, because it requires for us to cut long established ties, patterns of behaviour, even to leave behind familiar surroundings. If Levi had not left the tax station, he would not have become a follower of Jesus. In the same way, we were encouraged to reflect on what we may need to leave behind to follow Jesus.

I wonder how you got on with your reflections on these questions last week? Did you hit obstacles during the week? What were they? Or did you feel that you needed more tools to help you reflect? How did you find the change from speaking to listening in your prayer time? And have you made time to take up the Scriptures and listen to Jesus' words to you? How did you do in translating the *intention* to follow with the *doing* of following? Today we will be looking some more at what is entailed in the 'doing' aspects of following Jesus. following Jesus means doing God's will, and God's will is made known to us when we listen and hear his Word to us.

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At the heart of today's gospel reading stands the word 'doing'. 'What must I *do* to inherit eternal life', the lawyer asked Jesus. And Jesus asks him about whether he has done what we did during the course of the last week: 'Have you read the Scriptures?', he asks, 'what do you read there?' The lawyer had faithfully studied the Scriptures, and cited the 'first and great commandment, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.'" And Jesus assures the lawyer that it is this doing of God's will – loving God with all one's capacity and loving one's neighbour as oneself – that shapes life in God's presence here and life forever in God's presence hereafter. 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live', Jesus assures his questioner.

Jesus tells the lawyer that it is in doing the things that God commands that he will inherit life. When we do what God wishes us to do, we tap into the life that lasts. Because when we align our wills with his will, if we set our hearts on what he loves, then we already share in a life that is forever. Conversely if, like the lawyer in today's story, we seek to qualify, find reasons for why we may not be able to align our wills with God's, then we lose out, do not find the capacity to share in the life that God promises. When told the reassuring news that it is precisely as he himself had said, that it was by *doing* God's will that people found life, the lawyer questioned the *interpretation* of that will: 'all right, I understand that in order to live I need to love God with all the gifts God gives me, and my neighbour as myself; but who is my neighbour?' In another context, say, that of someone who understands well that it is a good thing to love our neighbours and serve them through positive social action, someone might instead ask, 'what does it mean to love myself', or 'how can I love God?'

At the end of our gospel story Jesus tells his questioner, 'go and do likewise'. He reinforces the example of the one passer-by who did what God commanded to do, and the gospel story moves on. We are not left, as in the story of the rich young man, with a reaction. Remember the young man digested what Jesus told him to do in order to follow him – 'go sell your possessions and then follow me' – determined that this command was too hard, and went away grieving? Today, Jesus simply leaves the lawyer and moves on. God's call means *doing* God's will, the story tells us, and our questioning that will separates us from God: whether that separation is brought actively, as in the story of the young man who walks away from Jesus grieving, or passively, as in the story of the lawyer from whom Jesus simply moves on.

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When God calls, there are three possible responses we may make. The call is made, and we obey and follow, as in the case of Levi and Peter and Andrew, James and John last week. Jesus came and called, the five left everything immediately to follow and share in that call. They made their immediate active response: they got up, left and at once followed Jesus. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes: 'First obey, do the external works, let go of what binds you, give up what is separating you from God's will. Do not say I do not have the faith for that. You will not have it ... so long as you will not take that first step'.

And the five who were the first to be called into discipleship realise that right here in front of them is God's living word, God's own command made flesh, calling out to them to get up and follow. Bonhoeffer explains: 'Here the gracious call of Jesus Christ to discipleship becomes a strict law: "Do this! Stop that!" Come out of the boat to Jesus', leave the toll booth and follow. And Levi, and the four fishermen hear and obey, and do what Jesus commands them to do: 'follow me', he calls, and they simply get up and follow. They hear the Word and do it without question whether or not they fully understand what is asked of them. Faith will grow and follow that first 'doing', that first stepping out, Bonhoeffer tells: 'You believe—so take the first step! It leads to Jesus Christ. You do not believe—take the same step; it is commanded of you!'

The second response to God's call is like that of the rich young man. The call is made, and we want to obey and follow, but the demands of the 'doing part' of the call on us are too hard. In the story of the rich young man he realises that his heart is set more on his possessions than on God, and walks away grieving. Bonhoeffer reflects: 'Jesus only has one expectation of me, namely that I believe'. Believe that God's will for me is good, his command to me life giving. Believe that life in his presence

is greater and better than any other way of living. He explains: 'My faith, however, is not tied to poverty or wealth or some such thing. On the contrary in faith I can be both—rich *and* poor'.

The rich young man's possessions claim his heart, command his thinking, determine his doing. In examining what it means to follow, the main concern Bonhoeffer concludes, 'is not that I have any worldly goods, but that I should possess goods as if I did not possess them, and inwardly be free of them'. What is important is not what I have, or not, but what I do. By all means have possessions, 'but have them as if you did not have them. Do not set your hearts on possessions', but do instead set your hearts on God. And the realisation that setting our heart on God means changing what will always be heart wrenching. Just as, in the case of the rich young man, it was heart-breaking because his obedience was to his wealth, not God. Bonhoeffer tells: 'The young man is standing before Jesus, the Son of God. The full encounter is present. The only choices are yes or no, obedience or disobedience'. And *grieving* disobedience still is disobedience, still is not following.

The third response to God's call is the response shown in today's gospel reading. There are choices to be made, and those choices are active: are about doing the acts of love, about doing God's will, our gospel story tells us. The call is made, the doing part – 'love God, love your neighbour as yourself' – is reinforced, and yet the lawyer sees an ambiguity in the command, questions 'who then is my neighbour' and, unable to accept the command, is left behind by Jesus. That is one of the slyest forms of disobedience to God's call, Bonhoeffer explains: 'What then happens is that people get so stubborn in their disobedience ... that they claim they can no longer discern between what is good and what is God's command. They claim it is ambiguous and permits various interpretations'.

And so the lawyer professes that he seeks to be obedient, but feels that God will not tell him how he can be so. Rather than seek God, the lawyer is in fact running away from God, Bonhoeffer tells: 'If the questioner is standing directly before God, then he is exposed as one who was fleeing from God's revealed commandment which he himself already knew. ... Why does he act as if he did not already know the answer to his question? Why does he want to accuse God of leaving him in ignorance in this most decisive question of life?' Bonhoeffer reflects on the lawyer's questions: 'the question "What should I do?" is the first betrayal. The answer is: "Do the commandment that you know. You should not *ask*, you should *act*". The question "Who is my neighbour?" is the final question of despair or hubris, in which disobedience justifies itself. The answer is "You yourself are the neighbour. Go and be obedient in acts of love".' And, in this way, Bonhoeffer believes, the lawyer 'is already caught and brought to judgment. He is called back from the question of salvation in general to simple obedience'.

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Responding to the call to follow Jesus, then, simply means doing what Jesus calls us to do. Responding to Jesus' call means following Jesus' commandments. And those commandments are given us as an opportunity to do in practical terms what Jesus models: when we do the actions of faith, when we obey Jesus' call, we shift from the abstract beliefs of the lawyer – who professed that he had followed all of God's commandments throughout his life, who clearly knew what was required of him but failed to act on that knowledge – to the *practical* faith Jesus invites us to share through what we do.

When we follow Christ's call as disciples, faith becomes a quality, an action; a vocation that we take on ourselves and actively live out. A practise and discipline of actions that gives shape to our faith. I give thanks that God gifts us the practise of the 'doing aspects' of our faith. And so, in the week to come, I invite you to do three things:

- Think about what being obedient to Jesus' call for you means. What does it mean for you to do the will of God? What does it feel like when you do God's will? Perhaps write down what practical obedience to God looks and feels like for you.
- Think about what stands in the way to your being obedient to Jesus' call. Are there things or concerns you may need to let go, like the rich young man, in order to be obedient? Or are there fundamental dispositions that need shifting in your lives, like the self-righteousness of

the lawyer? How will you go about shifting, changing? Perhaps make a concrete plan, listing the kinds of areas you commit to working on in your faith life.

- Think about how you can show forth in your life the love that God has for you by loving yourself and your neighbours more. What does it feel like to be loved. What does it feel like love yourself as you love God? How do you show that love to yourself? And how can you share that love with others? Again, I encourage you to think of concrete ways in which you can practise this that in the coming week, write those down and begin to do them.

'When Jesus commands, then I should know that he never demands legalistic obedience. Instead he has only one expectation of me: namely, that I believe', Bonhoeffer encourages us. And that belief is expressed in concrete actions. 'Do this and you shall live', Jesus said to the lawyer, and to both him and us he says, 'go and do likewise'.

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 LENTEN STUDIES, STUDY TWO

LAST WEEK'S REVIEW QUESTIONS FROM THE DEAN

(You may choose to answer these questions at the end of the study, rather than at the beginning).

1. Did you hit obstacles during the week? What were they?
2. Did you feel that you needed more tools to help you reflect? How did you find the change from speaking to listening in your prayer time?
3. Have you made time to take up the Scriptures and listen to Jesus' words to you?
4. How did you do in translating the intention to follow with the doing of following?

5. Read Luke 10:25 – 37

- (a) What question did the lawyer ask Jesus? (v.25)
- (b) What does it mean to "inherit eternal life"? How is "inheriting eternal life" related to being a disciple of Jesus? (See John 3:15-16; John 3:36 with John 14:21 and John 15:10.)
- (c) In the story of the "Good Samaritan" Jesus chose a Samaritan as the hero of the story. Samaritans and Jews hated each other and would avoid even speaking with one another. What significance does this have to Jesus' story and to the question "Who is my neighbour?"
- (d) Who, then, is **our** neighbour in 21st century Australia?

6. In his sermon, Dean Andreas stated that there were three possible responses to Jesus' call to follow Him :
 - (i) Obey and follow
 - (ii) Hear the call, but find it too difficult.
 - (iii) Say we will be obedient, but claim we don't know how to be.

- (a) What is our/your response to Jesus' command to "love your neighbour as yourself"?
- (b) What are you/we **doing** in response to this command?

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

Think about what being obedient to Jesus' call for you means. What does it mean for you to do the will of God? What does it feel like when you do God's will? Perhaps write down what practical obedience to God looks and feels like for you.

- Think about what stands in the way to your being obedient to Jesus' call. Are there things or concerns you may need to let go, like the rich young man, in order to be obedient? Or are there fundamental dispositions that need shifting in your lives, like the self-righteousness of the lawyer? How will you go about shifting, changing? Perhaps make a concrete plan, listing the kinds of areas you commit to working on in your faith life.
- Think about how you can show forth in your life the love that God has for you by loving yourself and your neighbours more. What does it feel like to be loved. What does it feel like love yourself as you love God? How do you show that love to yourself? And how can you share that love with others? Again, I encourage you to think of concrete ways in which you can practise this that in the coming week, write those down and begin to do them.

Prayer

*O God, fountain of love, pour your love into our souls, that we may love those whom you love with the love you give us, and think and speak about them tenderly, meekly, lovingly; and so loving our brothers and sisters for your sake, may grow in your love, and live in love and living in love may live in you; for Jesus Christ's sake. **Amen***