

Mark 2.13-17

What does it mean for us to follow Jesus today?

Isolation v. Community

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association breeds its own dogs – which means it generally has a lot of puppies that need house-training. They have a small army of puppy walkers who do all the hard work, house-training the dogs, teaching them to walk on a lead, stopping them from barking, getting them used to walking round shops and so on. It's a tough task. And after a year or so, just when the puppy is well-behaved, the GDBA want it back for its proper training.

All that initial training is hard work, for the puppy walkers and the puppies. But it is made so much easier if you have an older dog as well as the puppy. The puppy watches and copies what the older one does, making it much easier for the puppy walkers to get the puppy through its initial training.

The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation. You can't be a Christian and not belong to a Christian community that meets regularly. That doesn't have to be a 'church' in the traditional sense, but a regular meeting of Christians to learn and socialise together. Look at Levi (or Matthew, as he was also known). After responding to Jesus' call, he doesn't go home for some quiet meditation on the decision he's just made – no! – he goes home and throws a massive party. He invites all his tax-collector buddies and Jesus and all his (little 'd') disciples (of which there were many, Mark tells us).

This isn't about being in a club – it's about belonging to a family, where the younger members look up to the older ones and imitate their example. Look around you at the people who have been Christians for years – decades even. They aren't perfect, but they do have an awful lot of experience of what it means to live a Christian life. Just like Guide Dog puppies, the younger members of the community learn more, and they learn it more quickly and easily, if they heed the example of the older members.

If someone tries to 'go it alone', and ignores all the advice, the example, the help and encouragement of other Christians, that person will fail. No question. Because it's really *really* hard to live an entire life following Jesus. Yet that is what every Christian is called to do – that is the vocation to which each of us is called.

Pride v. Love

So the Christian life cannot be lived in isolation. But it also cannot be lived in pride. At its rock-bottom, pride is believing you are better than someone else, or even everyone else. In our passage today it is embodied by the Pharisees. As Jesus is enjoying Levi's feast, the Pharisees complained to his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' They were indignant that such people could enjoy such a great party with Jesus. He should associate with *them*, the Pharisees, not tax-collectors and *sinners*.

As always, Jesus' response is not what you might expect. He has a way of answering questions in such a way that his answer poses a question to yourself. Here, he tells the

Pharisees that it is only the sick who need a doctor, that he has come to call not the righteous, but sinners. Jesus is laying on the irony here. In their pride, the Pharisees considered themselves 'righteous'. They thought they had it all, that they didn't need anything from any other people. They thought that a relationship with God was found in obeying strict laws *to the letter* – and anyone who didn't they labelled a 'sinner'. In their pride they considered themselves better than others.

Instead of looking down on others, Jesus came to heal them. Instead of distancing himself from them as the Pharisees did, he came to eat and drink with them. Instead of pride, he was filled with *love*. Instead of condemnation, Jesus offered them forgiveness.

Jesus is quite right (of course) – the healthy have no need for a doctor; but the sick do. The righteous have no need for forgiveness; but sinners do. The irony of this story is that of course we are all 'sick', we are all sinners; we all need healing, we all need forgiveness. The Pharisees' pride stopped them from seeing their own sin. And because they didn't recognise their own need, they could do nothing about it.

Pride is the best way to destroy a community, the best way to upset other people, the best way to offend, to drive away. Pride is the disease that affects everyone except the one who has it. Love, however, is the best way to build a community, to encourage and welcome other people. Today, as in first-century Israel, following Jesus means being filled with love, not pride. It is one of the greatest things that Jesus called his followers to do. It involves humility and self-sacrifice, and is the hardest thing Jesus called his followers to do.

General and Personal Vocations

We could look in much more detail at what it means to follow Jesus, to live a Christian life. There are many different examples of how people have lived their Christian lives – not least of which are the Christian 'heroes', people like John Wesley, Hudson Taylor, Mother Theresa and so on.

Although we can learn what the vocation to be a Christian might be by looking at others, the harder job is trying to work out what our specific vocation is. Jesus doesn't simply issue a general call to everybody 'Follow me,' he does it personally. Just as he saw Levi as he was walking by and said *to him*, 'Follow me,' so he says it to each of us. He has specific places and purposes in mind for each one of us when he calls us.

Imagine a rugby team, or any other sports team, cricket, football, netball, whatever. Each person on the team has the job of playing rugby – it's what they do, they're professionals. They all have to be able to pass and catch the ball. They all have to be able to make a tackle. And, if you've ever been a member of a rugby team, most seem required to be able to drink copious amounts of alcohol.

But a fly-half wouldn't be much good in a scrum, would he? And a prop would be a hopeless winger, although perhaps a scary one. One or two members of the team have to be good at kicking the ball, others at throwing it in at a lineout, others at running fast. They're all rugby players, but they all have different roles and tasks in a rugby team.

If all the team-members were good at the same thing, the team would probably lose every match they played. Imagine a cricket team full of batsmen, or a football team of goalkeepers. Now think about the church. If everyone were a vicar, what an awful place it would be! If everyone were under thirty, where would the experience be? If everyone were over fifty, where would the energy and excitement be? If everyone were a preacher, who would serve the coffee? If everyone played the piano, who would run the Sunday school?

All these vicars, young people, older people, preachers, administrators, musicians, children's workers and so on – they all go together to make up the same church, like the rugby players all play for the same team.

So how do we know what our role is in the church? How do we find out what our specific calling is? How do we know if we are a prop-forward, an inside-centre or a full-back?

Discerning a Vocation

Just as Jesus has many different tasks within the church that he calls us to, so there are many ways that he calls us. Some are spectacular, many are much less so. Also, vocations can change over the course of our life. If you work something out when you're twenty, that doesn't necessarily mean you'll still be doing it when you're fifty.

The really important thing about vocation is that you talk to older, wiser and more experienced person before you make any life-changing decisions. Test everything against what we know of God from Scripture. For example, if you are married with children, God isn't going to call you to live in a monastery for the rest of your life.

So, how does Jesus call us today? Some people have a dramatic vision, where they see and/or hear Jesus speaking to them, calling them to a particular place, situation or role. There are some examples of this in Acts, but the Holy Spirit didn't stop working when the last Apostle died. Read *The Heavenly Man* by Brother Yun of China, for example. This kind of vision is extremely rare, so don't rely on being graced with one yourself!

Another way might be God speaking to you powerfully through a passage from the Bible, or a sermon, a Christian biography, a piece of music. This way is much more common. Something grabs your attention, and your mind (and stomach) start doing somersaults. You find yourself thinking that a life living in squalor in the Gobi desert on a mission might not be so bad after all. If this happens, talk to one of your church leaders about it. Ask them what they think, if it's something worth pursuing.

Thirdly, listen to what other people tell you. If people keep coming up to and telling you that you'd make a great worship leader, then it might be a good idea to join the music group. Don't underestimate how often God speaks to us through other people. If you have a little inkling that God might be calling you to do something, mention it to people who know you well. You might even find they tell you before you get a chance to tell them! Listen to what people say, and if lots of different people are telling you the same thing, listen carefully, and talk to someone about it.

Fourthly, if it's something you love doing, and you get the chance to, give it a go. Short-term mission placements are easy to find – people like CMS and Interserve offer various short-term options, from three weeks to six months, to a year or more. If you love music, try playing in the church music group. If there isn't one, start one! If you love working with children, get involved with the children's work. If you think you might be being called to be a vicar, get involved in church leadership somehow – talk to your vicar, see what you can do. You will only find out if it is really your vocation by testing it practically. The more you put yourself out, the more chance you give God to speak (and yourself to listen), the more you'll hear.

Listening in Community

God speaks in so many ways, we have to keep our ears, eyes, hearts and minds open to his calling. Don't mistake it for human calling, and don't mistake a human call for God's. It's a tricky tight-rope to walk, but it is possible, with the help of others. This is one of the reasons why being a member of a Christian community is vital for living a Christian life, and discerning your vocation. And it is also why pride is extremely unhelpful. Only by being open to what others say, to what God is saying, and the possibility that you yourself might be wrong (God forbid!), will you be able to find out what your personal vocation is.

Some more don'ts: don't compare yourself with others, favourably or unfavourably. Each of us has a special, personal vocation, all different, and all equally important, equally necessary to the church. Don't spend your whole life worrying about what God is calling you to do, so that you miss him telling you what it is! And *don't ever* stop listening to what God is saying.

Finally, if God has given you certain gifts, use them for his service, and see what happens. You may end up in the Gobi desert, you may end up serving coffee, you may end up preaching in a revival. The exciting thing is: the same God calls us, whatever our vocation may be; the same God gives us his Spirit of power, strength, love and humility to enable us to carry out that vocation; and it is the same God whom we serve in living out our vocation every day.