

Matthew 4.18-22

Coming and going: the rhythm of discipleship

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 15 January 2023

Come and Go [1]

Series Introduction

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home, and to have faith from being an infant – but I made a decision to give my heart to Jesus when I was 10, after reading *Treasures of the Snow* by Patricia St John with my Dad. We didn't talk about it much but he made sure I had age-appropriate Bible study materials to use. I had very few Christian friends at school or at church until I got to university, but there I almost fell away from faith aged 20 – were it not for Mike and Stefi I wouldn't be here. At various points from the age of 14 I felt called to full-time ministry: I was ordained deacon at 25, and priest at 31 after a long delay and a hard fight due to some unwise choices. It's been a bumpy ride – some of it my fault, some of it unavoidable. I've loved, I've been hurt, I've hurt others, I've made and lost some wonderful friends, and tried to serve God faithfully whatever I've been doing.

When was I called to be a disciple? Was it sitting in the lounge with Dad aged 10? Was it aged 14 when I felt the call to full-time ministry? Was it when I came back to faith at university? Was it when I chose the church over an IT career? Or is every morning I decide to begin the day in prayer rather than in work?

Most of you know me well enough by now to know that the answer to all those questions is ‘yes’. The decision to follow Jesus is one we all need to make every single day. The decision to live as his disciples is one that affects every single other decision we make, from the clothes we wear, to the place we live, to the food we eat, to the company we keep, to the words we speak.

So whether you first became a Christian in a moment of decision as an adult, or you grew up in a Christian household, or you feel far away, slipping, or on your way back – what matters is that we respond to Jesus’ call. And that response is not a one-off but a daily decision, a daily rhythm of discipleship: every day we **come to** Jesus and every day we **go with** Jesus.

We **come to** Jesus to rest, to listen, to learn, to be inspired – we **go with** Jesus in obedience, in faith, in confidence. This term we are alternating between Jesus’ call to **come**, and his command to **go** – I pray we all learn and grow in that rhythm of discipleship.

The region: Galilee

I wonder – who here has lived the furthest North? I'll start us off with Teesside – any advance on that?

Centuries before Jesus, the kingdom of Israel split in two: Judah to the South, and Israel to the North. The Southern kingdom of Judah was relatively faithful to God but the Northern kingdom of Israel went off track pretty quickly. They abandoned God to worship idols, and absorbed beliefs and practices from the surrounding nations – creating a hybrid pagan-Jewish religion.

The quote from Isaiah shortly before this morning's reading summarises how the Jews in the South thought about their cousins in the North – now known as Samaritans:

‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, [that is: the North]
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles – [that is: it's no longer Jewish]
the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.’

Matthew 4.15-16 (quoting Isaiah 9.1-2, NIV)

We might have expected God's Son to start his mission at the place where God's presence among his people was focused: in Jerusalem, the home of the Temple, to which all faithful Jews had to travel regularly to worship. But Jesus lived **in Capernaum**, by Lake **Galilee** (12-13), in the far North, which Isaiah described as a place of **darkness** and **death**, and without God. Then and now Jesus comes to those who live in darkness; he is the light that has **dawned on them** (16) – that has dawned on *us*.

We might have expected God's Son to call the religious leaders and experts to be first in his new community – but actually he called **fishermen** (18). They had to be pretty tough because Lake Galilee has appalling weather – hence Jesus calming a couple of sudden storms. But it was also teeming with fish, so they probably made a decent living; James and John certainly did because we know from Mark that their family business had **hired men** (Mark 1.20). They weren't poor – but neither were they wealthy. They were ordinary, hard-working folk.

And, like the lake was teeming with fish, this region of spiritual darkness had a large population with lots of towns and villages – lots of people who needed the light, and were ripe for fishing.

The rhythm: come and go

Sometimes when I ask to pop round to see people – or even when I simply phone someone – they get suspicious. I can hear it in the voice: ‘Why does the vicar want to speak to me?’ Sometimes it even borders on panic.

Now, I’ll admit, sometimes I do want to talk to people or ask them about specific things – in which case I’ll tell you up front – but most of the time the purpose is simply to get to know each other better.

Jesus told Peter, Andrew, James and John exactly what he wanted *from* them, and what he promised *to* them:

‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’

Matthew 4.19 (NIV)

Come. This is *not* an invitation: it is an imperative, a command. Jesus did not try to persuade them to be part of whatever it was he was doing; this was no polite request but an **unconditional, unexplained demand**.¹ Only Jesus can lead like this, only he can issue such a command – and he still issues it to us, today.

'Come, follow me.' Jesus did not invent the idea of a disciple – they were part of Jewish culture. A rabbi would gather a small band of men round him – sorry, ladies – who would listen to him, and learn from his teaching: the word ‘disciple’ means ‘learner’.

Disciples of Jesus listen, learn and obey: they put into practice all he teaches,² and follow his example. The original disciples physically gathered round and followed Jesus from place to place, learning as they went. We can’t do *that*, but we can still learn, we can still be disciples of Jesus.

Being a disciple of Jesus means reading and listening to *all* God says to us in the Bible through the Holy Spirit. It was *all* written by people but it also *all* comes from God. It points us to Jesus and tells who he was, why he came, and what he did. It gives us a reality check, teaches us about ourselves, and what it means to live as God’s people, foreigners in a hostile world. We need to read it in a way that is humble and prayerful, letting God teach, renew, change and wash us through it, by the power of the Spirit.

Being a disciple of Jesus means living out God’s way of life, even when it feels impossible, even when you don’t want to. Being a disciple of Jesus means sharing *your* heart and listening to *God’s* heart in prayer every day. Do you do all this?

Or do you hope that by coming to church some of it might seep in without you having to put much effort in – like all the books in my study that I haven’t read but somehow hope their insights will seep into my brain without me having to read them? Do you hope that one day you’ll find a way to spend time with God without having to sacrifice other things, like a bit of extra sleep, binge-watching TV programmes, doom-scrolling the news or social media or filling your mind’s eye with something worse? Do you hope that one day you’ll wake up and it will all be easy?

Friends, it sounds good, but it will never happen – and the truth is that Christians who drift, drift in one direction and in one direction only: and that is away from Jesus.

I struggle to make time to pray and read the Bible daily – I’ve been unemployed, worked a normal job, been a vicar and lots else in between – and have always struggled. You can believe me, or not, but it’s true. And it’s not an excuse, it’s simply reality. Life pulls us away from Jesus: we need be deliberate about keeping our focus on him.

If this is something you need help with – ask! If not me, find a trusted Christian friend, and help each other. We don’t follow Jesus alone, but together.

Next is the purpose: '**I will send you out to fish for people'** (19).

The word is actually 'make' not **send**: central to Jesus' call and command, central to being a disciple of Jesus is that he makes us into something *new*. We do not stay as we are. 'God made me like this' is not a valid excuse for sinful behaviour. God is not done with us when we are born but calls us into a lifetime of sacrifice, of being made and remade, transformed and renewed – to become the people God is making us and calling us to be.

That said, although I'm not a fisherman and have never been fishing, I'm pretty sure they can't work from home. They have to go where the fish are – so both are true: Jesus *makes* us into **fishers of [people]**, and *sends* us **out to fish for people**.

In our new church vision and mission document, the summary is 'making, growing, sending disciples of Jesus'. In reality there is no neat division between the three – a lot of the time all three are going on at the same time. But the sending is important because – like the fishermen metaphor – it reminds us that to obey Jesus means to *go*, to be *sent*. In the same way that Jesus was sent into the world by the Father, so we are sent into the world by Jesus. Our call is to **come to** him, to listen, to learn, to be remade and renewed – so we can **go with** him, sent into all the world.

Why? Because people are lost, trapped and enslaved by sin and desire, brought low by pain and death and darkness. **On them** – as well as on us – **a light has dawned** (16): the light of Jesus.

The coming of light is good news – unless you like to hide in the darkness. That's why although **coming to** Jesus and spending time with him every day is challenging, actually it's the easy part.

Going out with Jesus is much, *much* harder – because the dark fights back. Because even though Jesus' disciples live in the light, the darkness still creeps in. Because even though Jesus has defeated sin once and for all on the cross, it still has power to damage and deceive and distract. Being a disciple of Jesus is hard.

But friends, it's worth it – because the **light** of Jesus can never be put out, because the **life** he brings will never end, because the **love** he shares is stronger than anything else in all creation. The cost is great – but the reward is greater.

The response: total

When I proposed to Jess, we were standing on the driveway of her student house. She thought she was on her way to lectures, clutching a pile of notes and textbooks. I got out the ring, went down on one knee, and asked her to marry me.

She said yes immediately, dropped all her papers on the drive, and flung herself at me, almost knocking me backwards – and causing the builders on their lunchbreak at the house next door to start guffawing. She asked to see the ring again, we put it on her finger, and then she hugged me again – while angling her hand so she could see her ring behind my back.

Matthew goes out of his way to tell us that these first disciples responded to Jesus' call like that. ***At once they left their nets and followed him*** (20), ***immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him*** (22).

From John's gospel we know this wasn't the first time they had met Jesus (John 1.35-42). Then, they simply spent time with him – now he was calling them to leave everything behind and go with him into an uncertain and unknown future.

And they did. **Immediately**. They left it all: their nets, their boats, their homes, their livelihoods, their families – they left it all for Jesus. Peter wasn't kidding when he said to Jesus (Mark 10.28), **'We left everything to follow you!'** They might not have been wealthy, but it cost them *everything* to follow Jesus. For most of them it ended up costing their lives as well: they held nothing back.

I wonder how I might have responded to Jesus calling me like he called them – perhaps in my study instead of out fishing. ‘Not *now* Jesus – can’t you see I’m busy?’ I might roll my eyes: ‘I’m in the middle of something important!’

Maybe I would tell him, ‘Wait until I’ve finished *this* – wait until *that* happens – wait until I have more *time* – and *then* I’ll follow you.’

Peter, Andrew, James, John – they were busy. Peter and Andrew were actually out on the lake fishing (18) when Jesus called them. And yet, they left it all and followed him.

They lost so much – but they gained more than they could ask or imagine. They gained new friends, new family. They learned new things, became new and renewed people. They changed almost beyond recognition – they became the people God was calling them to be. They knew hardship and persecution, but even though they were killed for their faith, they had grasped hold of the life that is stronger than death.

And because *they* faithfully bore witness to the risen Jesus, *we* are here today. There is an unbroken line of faith from these four men and the other first disciples, to us today.

Friends, Jesus didn't promise an easy life to these four men, and he doesn't promise it to us either.

But he does promise to remake us into the women and men God calls us to be – he promises to teach us, to change us, to use us, to mould us – so we can become and grow as disciples of Jesus, as children of God.

To live that life we need Jesus – we need that daily rhythm of coming to him and going with him. It isn't like a workplace induction – do it once and then off you go – it's like **breathing**. Jesus' disciples constantly **come to** him and **go with** him, all day, every day – like breathing, in the power of the Spirit.

Friends, let us learn how to breathe.

¹ Turner, *Matthew (BECNT)*, 136.

² France, *Matthew (TNTC)*, 109.