

Matthew 4.18-22

Come and Go

University of Birmingham CU

Thursday 14 March 2024

Decisions

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home, and to have faith from my infancy – 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. Throughout my childhood 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. From the age of 14 I felt called to full-time ministry, and was ordained into the Church of England aged 25.

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.

The question is: when did I decide to be a disciple? Sitting with Dad aged 10? Studying at university? Choosing the Church of England over a career in IT? Or is it every day I decide to begin that day in prayer rather than in work or something else? The answer of course, is 'Yes!' It's all of the above.

Every now and then we have big decisions to make, like, 'What am I going to do after I graduate?' They come along every now and then, and in a sense they're the easy ones to bring Jesus into because they're hard to ignore – so we talk and pray about them. But the truth is that being a faithful disciple of Jesus isn't really about those *big* decisions, it's about all the *little* decisions we make every single day. Those little decisions – from the clothes we wear to the food we eat, from the way we study to the things we watch and read, from the company we keep to the words we speak – all those daily decisions are where true discipleship is really found.

So whether you have been a Christian since birth, or made a decision as a teenager or here at university... whether you feel you are slipping away, clinging on, or simply exploring this Jesus stuff, what matters is we respond daily to Jesus, that we learn a daily rhythm of life with Jesus: coming to Jesus so we can go out onto campus, to our homes and families, into all the world.

That's what this series is all about. Over the next few weeks you will be invited to come to Jesus: to rest in him; to listen to him and to learn from him; to be encouraged, equipped, challenged and inspired by him. You will be invited to come to Jesus so you can go into the world in obedience and faith. That's why the series is called 'Come and Go'... we *come* to Jesus, so we can *go*: I call that the daily 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?

Our first passage is from Matthew 4. If you have a Bible or an app, it would be great to have it open, because I'm actually going to start just before the reading we had.

Centuries before Jesus, the nation of Israel split in half: Judah to the South, and Israel to the North. The Southern kingdom of Judah – which had Jerusalem in it – was relatively faithful to God but the Northern kingdom of Israel went off track pretty quickly. They abandoned the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob to worship idols, and they absorbed beliefs and practices from other nations – creating a sort of hybrid pagan-Jewish religion.

The quote from Isaiah beginning in verse 15 summarises how the Jews in the South felt about their cousins in the North – in Jesus' day 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 in the place where God's presence among his people was focused: **J** in Jerusalem, the home of the Temple, to which all faithful Jews had to travel regularly for worship. But verses 12-13 tell us Jesus lived **J** **in Capernaum**, by Lake **Galilee**: in the far North, among those people who had abandoned God for their own hybrid religion, in the area Isaiah described as a place of **darkness** and **death**. This was a place without God – and that's where God sent his Son.

And actually – where *better* for God's Son to start bringing his light and life and love than a place like that?

More than that – these words from Isaiah:

‘...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 4.16 (quoting Isaiah 9.2), NIV

... these words are more than a description of where Jesus began his earthly ministry; they are true today. Perhaps you feel you are **living in darkness**. Perhaps your heart is struggling under **the shadow of death**. Well I'm telling you today: come into the light. Come to Jesus, the **great light** of God that **has dawned** on us.

We might have expected God's Son to start his mission in Jerusalem – yet he didn't, he started it in the far North among people so far away from God they weren't even Jews any more.

But in this passage Jesus busts another expectation too.

We might have expected God's Son to call the leaders of God's people, those who had spent years learning, studying and teaching God's Word – we might have expected him to call people like that to be his first followers. But he didn't; verse 18 tells us he called **fishermen**.

Now, these guys had to be pretty tough because Lake Galilee has appalling weather – hence Jesus calming a couple of sudden storms. But it is also teeming with fish, so they probably made a decent living; James and John certainly did because we know from Mark’s gospel that their family business had **hired men** (Mark 1.20). They weren’t poor – but neither were they wealthy. These fishermen were from ordinary, hard-working families.

And, because the lake was so full of 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

I once worked for a **J** small IT company, that mainly provided IT support to other businesses. Although my job was writing software, when we had a big support contract, like installing equipment in a new office, it was all hands on deck.

However, I had no idea how to terminate a network cable or install Microsoft Exchange or any of the other pieces of business software. So my boss set up a test area in our office, for me to **come** and learn how to do all that, so I could **go** and help out. It’s a bit like that with Jesus.

Let's look at verse 19. Jesus told these four fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John – to **come** and learn how to be his disciples, so they could **go** and invite others to be disciples too.

§ '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'.

§ These disciples physically followed Jesus from place to place, listening and learning as they went, so they could obey him, put into practice all he taught,² and follow his example. We can't gather round Jesus quite like they did, but we can still learn what it means to be his disciples, in three main ways.

First, God speaks in many ways but the most important and authoritative way is through the Bible. This tells us who God is and who we really are: this gives us a reality check, teaches us what it means to live as God's people. Through the Bible God teaches us, renews us, changes and washes us, by the power of his Spirit.

Second, being a disciple of Jesus means sharing your heart and listening to the Father's heart in prayer; the Bible promises that as we draw near to him, he draws near to us (James 4.8).

Third, being a disciple of Jesus means copying & modelling God's way to others. People learn best by example – so be a good example to others, and find good people for yourself to learn what it means and looks like to serve God faithfully. Do you do this?

Or do you hope that by coming to CU or 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 shows, doom-scrolling social media or filling your mind with something worse? Do you hope that one day you'll wake up and being a disciple of Jesus will be easy?

I'm afraid that will never happen. It will never be easy. I struggle to make time to pray and read the Bible daily – I've been a student twice, 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; Christians who drift, drift only in one direction: and that is away from Jesus.

If this is something you need help with – ask! The world is hostile – campus is hostile! So find a trusted Christian friend, and help each other. We don't follow Jesus alone, but together.

Jesus' command is, **'Come, follow me'** – next he gives the purpose: **§ 'and I will send you out to fish for people'** (19).

The word is actually 'make' not **send**, so the old-fashioned **§ 'I will make you fishers of men'** (KJV) is more accurate. 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 and calling us to be.

Although the word is ‘make’ not ‘send’, I’m pretty sure fishermen can’t work from home. They have to go where the fish are – so both are true: Jesus *makes* us into **fishers of men**, and *sends* us **out to fish for people**. So to obey Jesus means to *go*, to be *sent*.

That’s where the second passage comes in, from the end of Matthew’s gospel. In chapter 4 the command is **‘Come, follow me’** (18), in chapter 28 it is **‘Go’ – ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’** (28.19).

In the same way that Jesus was sent into the world by the Father, so we are sent into the world by Jesus. He commands us **‘Come’** to him, to learn, to be renewed – and **‘Go’** into the world to make disciples. Why? Because people are lost, enslaved by sin, trapped by 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.

Although **coming to** Jesus every day is challenging, actually it’s the easy part. **Going out** into the dark world is *much* harder – because the darkness fights back. Even though Jesus’ disciples live in the light, the darkness still creeps in. Even though Jesus has defeated sin once and for all on the cross, it still has power to damage and deceive and distract. The world is hostile, the battle is real – *but* our future is secure because in the end the Lamb wins.

Being a disciple of Jesus is hard. But 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 gift is greater.

The response: total

§ When I proposed to my wife Jess, we were standing on the driveway of her student house – not far from here actually . She thought she was on her way to lectures, clutching a pile of notes and books. 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 laughing. 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).

Jesus called these men to leave behind everything they knew and everyone they loved, and go with him into an uncertain and unknown future. It sounds mad. Who would say yes to that?!

But 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!'** This is what he had in mind. They might not have been wealthy, but it cost them *everything* to follow Jesus. And 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 leave everything and follow you.'

Peter, Andrew, James, John – they were busy. Peter and Andrew were actually out on the lake fishing – **casting a net** (18) – while James and John were **preparing their nets** for work (19) when Jesus called them. And yet, **they left it all and followed him** (20).

What does that mean for you? § What do you need to leave behind so you can follow Jesus? A good question might be – what is number one in my life – is it Jesus? Another might be – who or what takes me away from Jesus instead of towards him? Or another – do I indulge or control my desires?

They are dangerous and hard questions to answer, because they end up in sacrifice. Peter, Andrew, James and John – they sacrificed so much. I wonder what their families thought when they didn't come home that night.

The four of them lost so much – but gained more than they could ever have imagined. They gained new friends, new family. They learned new things, became new and renewed people. They changed beyond recognition: § from **fishermen** § to **fishers of men**. Jesus said, '**Come,**' and they left everything. Jesus said, '**Go,**' and they went – even to the point of dying in obedience to Jesus' command.

Because *they* faithfully bore witness to the risen Jesus, *we* are here today. **There is an unbroken line of faith from these four men to us today**, because when Jesus said, 'Come,' they left everything to follow him, and because when Jesus said, 'Go,' they went, and gave their lives telling a hostile world the good news about Jesus.

Promise

So the daily rhythm of discipleship is:] ‘Come and Go’:

‘Come’ – **come, follow** Jesus and be changed, transformed, renewed, made to be the person he’s calling you to be.

‘Go’ – **go and make disciples**, sharing the light and life and love of Jesus with all.

‘Come and Go’ – and *know*: know that Jesus is with you always.

[Jesus said,] ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. **And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**’

Matthew 28.18-20 (NIV)

No matter what challenges you face, no matter what joys or hardships, no matter what big or small decisions you have to make – know that Jesus has promised to be **with you always**, no matter what. So let’s ‘Come and Go’ – with Jesus.

¹ Turner, *Matthew (BECNT)*, 136.

² France, *Matthew (TNTC)*, 109.