The Disciple's Call To Follow Jesus The Christ

This morning we reach a bit of a turning point in Luke's gospel. Up until now, Jesus has largely ministered in Galilee, training his disciples and helping them understand who he is. From now on his ministry moves more towards the Holy City, Jerusalem and the true purpose of his coming: to die in our place. And so as Jesus is preparing for this, so he is also preparing his disciples along the way. This mornings passage is clearly split into 3 sections and so that you know where I am going, I will take one section at a time. So please turn with me to Luke 9, verse 18 and we'll read to verse 20.

'Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" **19** And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." **20** Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God."

The other gospel writers, Matthew and Mark tell us that this event took place in a little Roman town of Caesarea Philippi, but Luke excludes the details to make known Jesus' prayer life. Time and again throughout his gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus prayed. Luke has Jesus praying privately, praying all night long, rising early to pray, teaching his disciples how to pray. He tells Parables about praying persistently and later, even in great anguish in the garden of Gethsemane, we see him praying while sweating drops of blood. And here he is now, verse 18 tells us, 'he was praying alone'.

It would be easy to skip over this verse this morning, but Luke chooses to call our attention to it. One thing is clear, Jesus' prayer life made a lasting impact on his followers and especially Luke. And so it should on us. The Holy Spirit had Luke mention it over and over, and so I think it is worth reiterating again this morning just how significant prayer is in the life of a believer.

The old English preacher, Charles Spurgeon expressed just how critical prayer is when he said, 'If any of you should ask me for an epitome of the Christian religion, I should say that it is in one word – prayer.' Martin talked a little bit about the activity of the devil a few weeks ago, and the devil is making it his aim to stop you praying. Why? Because he knows how powerful Christians are when they pray. He knows that we are not such a threat to his kingdom in our own strength. But when we pray we are not alone, we petition all the power of God. It just can't be over-emphasized just how crucial your prayer life is.

It might sound simplistic but the most important thing a born again Christian can do is to pray. Paul encourages us to 'pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.' (Ephesians 6:18a) I encourage you again this morning to pray. Pray alone; pray with your spouse, your children, your friends. If you want to see God move in your life and the lives of others, God has promised that he will respond to your prayers. We lack power when we don't ask of God and pray for His will to be done. Nothing is a good substitute for prayer; no activity can compensate. Jesus modelled it for a reason and sometimes it will seem easy and other times it

will be an intense battle. But we must fight to maintain a healthy prayer life no matter what.

As we continue, we realize why Jesus had to be in prayer, because he was about to discuss some serious matters with massive implications and reveal his future and destiny to the disciples for the first time. And so as we come to see who Peter declares Jesus to be my first point this morning is

Who do you say Jesus is?
Luke tells us that while Jesus is praying alone, the disciples join him. We're not sure if they joined him in prayer or interrupted his prayer time, but they were around. So, out of his prayer time, Jesus asks them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?"

He allows them some time to speculate, and then what we find is, that there are a variety of opinions about who exactly Jesus is. They answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." I like the observation J. C. Ryle makes here. He says that 'these opinions all agreed about one thing. That Jesus' teaching was not like that of the teachers of the religious law and the Pharisees. Everyone saw in Him as a bold witness against the evil that was in the world' It's clear that people thought very highly of Jesus and accepted that he was unique; even in a different league.

Now I'm sure that Jesus already knew who people thought he was, but then Jesus follows this general question with a far important follow-up, personal question, 'But what about you?' Jesus asks. 'Who do you say I am?' And Peter replies with an answer that Matthew, in his gospel, tells us is divinely inspired. Peter responds 'You are the Christ of God.'

Now, it is difficult for us to fully appreciate this remarkable answer from Peter today, as we have only ever known Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. We just think 'correct Peter, well done!' But if we can put ourselves into Jewish shoes for a moment, then what Peter has just confessed is unprecedented. We know that the Jewish nation was expecting the Messiah or Christ (both mean the same thing) to come and deliver them from Roman occupation. They clung tightly to the Messianic prophecies in Micah, Isaiah and Daniel and they expected to welcome a commanding King, a glorious ruler who would overpower Israel's enemies with great strength. So, in Jesus, they saw no royal dignity according to the world's standards; after all, he was born into poverty, in a stable, no crown, no army, no sword. They saw a man who didn't even always have a place to sleep at night. Yet, despite this, Peter boldly dares to answer with great faith, 'You are the Christ of God'. 'You are our Messiah.' Peter discerns that Jesus is God's anointed one, prophesied long ago who would act for God and bring about the long awaited salvation promised to Israel.

And so we know what Peter's answer to Jesus' question was, and he was absolutely correct. But what about you this morning? Who do you say that Jesus is? Most of you will affirm your fundamental Christian beliefs about who Jesus is, and that is good. But perhaps you are here this morning and you don't actually know who Jesus really is and you want to find out. Some of you perhaps haven't labelled yourself "Christian." You've been learning and investigating. But just like these disciples Jesus asks you that same question this morning and you simply cannot stay neutral.

Your life on this earth and for all of eternity is affected by your answer to this one question. Who do you believe that Jesus is? And what will you do about it? I pray that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God as Peter did. The bible says "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9) Don't leave this morning without acknowledging who Jesus is; it's far too important a question.

And so, with His true identity exposed, Jesus goes on to predict his death saying: *(verse 21-22)*

Jesus Foretells His Death
"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." This isn't exactly what his disciples wanted to or expected to hear, but it was the reason Jesus had left his throne in heaven to come to Earth and it was necessary. Just think how much of a shock would have been to his disciples. Remember, they're still expecting and hoping, that Jesus is their Messiah, who's come to free them from the Romans and bring salvation to their nation. Peter has just confirmed this. But now these men are left not only confused but also devastated at the thought of losing their Master and friend.

To put it in modern day language, one bible commentator explains, 'It is as if a presidential candidate announced towards the end of his campaign that he is going to Washington to be rejected and executed.' It just wouldn't make sense. How can Jesus be the Messiah and have this happen? In fact, Matthew tells us in his gospel, that the disciples were so appalled that Peter brashly rebuked Jesus, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" They just couldn't understand it all. But notice that word 'must'. Jesus knows what must happen to him. He must suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be raised the third day. Why must these things happen? Because, as 1 Peter 1:20 tells us, God, in his perfect wisdom has had this planned from before the world began and will see to it that it is fulfilled.

And we know that Jesus did indeed suffer greatly at the hands of men, he was rejected by the leaders and elders of his own nation, he was killed on the cross and he did indeed rise again on the third day. That's why we are even here this morning; if he didn't we might as well all go home! But Jesus went to his death willingly that he might rescue us from our sin and provide salvation for all who put their trust in Him. And if that is not motivation enough for what Jesus then calls us to in the next part of the passage, then nothing is. He sacrificed himself unto death and now he is about to ask us to do the same.

The call to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus
23 And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. **24** For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. **25** For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?

And so, after Jesus has exposed exactly who He is and what must happen to Him, he then turns to the crowds and calls them to share in his suffering as his followers, and to do what he will do, which is suffer, be rejected and die.

As if it wasn't hard enough for the disciples to hear that he would be abused, suffer, face rejection and be killed; now Jesus is saying that if they want to follow him, they must partake in this suffering as well. And so must we if we desire to follow Christ this morning. We simply can't escape the words in red! This is indeed one of the most difficult passages in scripture. It's not one that you tend to stick up on the fridge! But Jesus is clear. He says if you want to be his disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow him.

So what does it mean to deny yourself and take up your cross daily? Well to properly grasp what Jesus meant, we have to understand what the cross was. You see, as Christians, today we associate the cross with victory, profound humility, and Christ's perfect work, accomplished for us that we might be saved. And so we should, but actually, that's not what the crowd would have been thinking when Jesus said this. Everybody there knew what Jesus meant when He said take up your cross, and would have shuddered at the thought. To them the cross was shameful. So shameful in fact, that the Romans, who invented this method of execution, wouldn't even use it on their own citizens. And Deuteronomy (21:23) states that 'cursed was any man who hung on a tree' Therefore the Jews were repulsed as well by the idea of death by crucifixion.

They all knew what the cross was: an unrelenting instrument of nothing but death. The cross was a gruesome way to execute people and I don't think I need to explain the details of how it worked but it wasn't a pleasant way to die. Suffice it to say that the Romans wanted to develop the most horrific form of capital punishment and torture, and so they came up with the cross. One bible commentator (Guzik) says, 'Our problem is that we have sanitized and ritualized the cross in these twenty centuries after Jesus.' He continues, 'How would we receive it if Jesus said, "walk down death row daily and follow Me"?' And yet that is exactly what Jesus demands of his followers. A daily crucifixion of ourselves to the world.

Another misconception about what it means to take up your cross is found in common expression, 'Well we all have our crosses to bear' Phrases like this imply that bearing a cross is like carrying a burden, for example a broken relationship, or a lousy job. Actually, this is not what Jesus means when he says 'take up your cross' either.

So what does He mean? He means that you and I must die to ourselves everyday in order to allow Him to live His life through us. How do we do that? Well, the Bible is full of examples. For instance, I am called to love my wife, Nicola, as Christ loved the church, which means daily putting her needs above my own. Please don't feel the need to go and ask her afterward if I actually do this all the time, or she might have to lie! Another example of crucifying the flesh might be putting your work colleagues needs above your own or not fighting your corner when you think your right about something. Young people, crucifying your flesh might mean you don't watch a film that you know will harm your conscience or choosing not to go to a party where you know you'll be tempted and won't be able to bear it. It's all about

reckoning ourselves dead to the world and living to please Christ above ourselves. It means we must stay in a constant attitude of self-denial, fighting a daily battle to surrender our own wills and desires to give place to God's. Galatians 2:20 spells it out, 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'

But remember this is a life-long calling and process and discipleship is training. We learn to deny ourselves and grow in surrendering our wills to God. While conversion happens immediately, discipleship doesn't. All of us here are being changed by the Holy Spirit day-by-day and growing in our understanding and practice of these things. None of us will ever fully have it down! No one will deny themselves absolutely like Jesus did because we aren't perfect but nonetheless this is the call.

This denial of self that Jesus calls us to speaks of a mind-set that we must adopt. It is about our attitude towards the world and towards God. Paul said in Phil 3:8, 'Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.' Listen to Paul's language. He doesn't even begin to compare the values of this world with the knowledge of Christ. The thought repulses him enough to call it trash, garbage, cow dung in the King James Version!

God has blessed us with many amazing gifts like living in Switzerland, having food on the table, nice homes, plenty of clothing, bank accounts, and education. And it pleases Him to see you enjoying the life He has given you with gratefulness, but, to use Paul's words, it's a pile of Cow Dung compared to knowing Christ! If only we treated it that way. But so often we don't, we get so easily caught up in it all. God's blessings to us become our gods and we treat them like they are of more value to us than God Himself. We must see ourselves as stewards, and not owners, of the gifts God has given to us. And be ready to forsake any and all of them if He should require them of us. What value are they to us if we pursue them and in the mean time lose our soul?

JC Ryle, when commenting on this passage, talks about 'the unspeakable value of the soul. To emphasize this value, he continues, 'The loss of the soul is the heaviest loss that can befall a man. The worst and most painful of diseases--the most distressing bankruptcy of fortune--the most disastrous shipwrecks--are a mere scratch of a pin compared to the loss of a soul. All other losses are bearable, or but for a short time, but the loss of the soul is for evermore. It is to lose God, and Christ, and heaven, and glory, and happiness, to all eternity. It is to be cast away forever, helpless and hopeless in hell!'

Obviously, Jesus knows that none of us could literally gain the entire world, but even if we could, what would we be gaining? 1 John 2:15-17 tells us that 'all that is in the world is the lust of eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life.' So what are we talking about when we talk about the world? All that your passions hunger for, all that your eyes covet, and all that your pride demands. What if you got all of that? What if you had every lust fulfilled? And could satisfy your every whim and wish? What would it matter? If you got all that you wanted on planet earth and then lost your soul eternally. What would you have gained?

The tone by now has become very weighty and Jesus concludes his call to discipleship by saying that we cannot be ashamed of who He is and what He stands for. Verse 26, '**26** For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. **27** But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God." The final point this morning is 'being ashamed of the Saviour.'

Being ashamed of the Saviour

Jesus explains that difficulty, sacrifice and persecution are part of the cost of discipleship. The Apostle Paul says to the young pastor, Timothy, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). I remember as a schoolboy when I would have my friends over who weren't Christian, I would take down all the scriptures dotted around our house so they would see them. I was ashamed of Jesus. Actually I wasn't even a believer at the time but my parents were and I was embarrassed about it! But this is exactly what Jesus is saying; we must decide whether or not we will identify ourselves publicly with Him. If we're ashamed of him, he will be ashamed of us on the Day when he returns in his glory. That's a frightening thought!

I don't know about you, but when all peoples, nations and men of every language worship Jesus and fall on their knees in submission to Him, I don't want him to disown me, because I was ashamed of him on this earth.

You see, the choice to be a disciple of Jesus is not an option for the Christian believer. You can't be a Christian but not a disciple. I've often heard people say, 'he might be your Saviour, but is he your Lord?' Scripture doesn't allow this scenario: he is either your Saviour and your Lord, or he is neither. We will either lay down our lives and follow Jesus, or we will seek to add Jesus to our own lives and risk deceiving ourselves about our religiousness and lose our own souls. One person said 'Discipleship is not a more difficult path in Christianity. It is the only path to life. We either follow Jesus' path, or we lose our way.'

Perhaps after observing Jesus call this morning you think it all sounds like a lot of sacrifice on our part. Well the truth is, we will never find personal happiness until we are fully committed to Him. Happiness is the by-product of self-denial and a daily death of ourselves. Listen to Psalm 144:15, 'Happy are the people who's God is the Lord! I've certainly never read about or met anyone who has denied themselves, taken up their cross to follow Christ and regretted it. Sure it's not all plain sailing, but this life was never meant to be; heaven is reserved for that. No, we will never be truly content until we make Jesus our everything. 'Happy are the people who's God is the Lord! Let's pray.