17-1-21 ‘Follow Me’ A sermon for St James, Bolton by Rev Steve Lees (1 Sam 3:1-10 & John 1:43–end)

Last week we were looking at the baptism of Christ, and it led me to encourage us all to walk ‘in step with the Spirit’. At our Monday Zoom Bible study, we thought about what this might mean. Someone remembered Jesus saying ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me’ (Matt 11:28-30), and shared a picture of two oxen being yoked together. A yoke is a wooden bar that tethers the animals together; they can’t wander off on their own but because the two are together they are a lot more productive to the farmer (ploughing fields etc) than they would be on their own. Another picture someone share was being in a three-legged race (remember those from school days?); at first, it’s really hard to work together but once you learn, you can run fairly fast…if you don’t, you will both fall over! Why on earth am I telling you this? Well, as we will see from our gospel passage, Jesus invites us to first of all follow him but also to work in partnership with him.

Jesus found Philip and said to him; *“Follow me”* (John 1:43). The original Greek word for follow means to ‘walk in the footsteps of’ but also means ‘to accompany, or to be with’. In other words, Jesus was inviting Philip, just as he invites you and me, to a deep personal friendship and to a partnership; to be with him. There are two things I want us to learn from John’s passage. 1) Promise of blessing 2) Challenge to bless others

Promise of blessing. In these days of global pandemic and restriction it’s easy for us to feel anxious, to become isolated & lonely. But hold on to the promise that Jesus accompanies those who answer his call to follow him. I’m glad that God is patient with those he calls; maybe like Samuel you find yourself confused? God is patient and calls Samuel four times before he is ready to listen; and he’s only ready to listen once he’s talked about it with someone else (three times!). If you’re facing a big decision, or need direction from God, keep listening and make sure you talk about it with someone you trust.

God is patient even when Nathaniel is both sceptical and dismissive; *“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”* Maybe, you feel sceptical, suspicious even, that God would want to show his goodness to you; to give good things to you (ask him…see Luke 11:13). God is patient, keep seeking Him! Look what happens to Nathaniel; as soon as he meets Jesus, he is affirmed; *“Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” (v47)* Nathaniel then recognises Jesus for who he is; *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” (v49)* Nathaniel’s faith, prompts a promise; *“You shall see greater things…”*

So, in these times of anxiety, confusion, and suspicion, keep seeking Jesus, who promises us the blessing of being with us always (Matt 28:20).

Earlier in John 1 the first disciples ask Jesus, ‘Where are you staying?’ (v37), Jesus replies, ‘Come and see’. The Greek for ‘staying’ is the same one that Jesus uses later in John 15*. ‘Remain in me as I also remain in you.’ (v4)* In other words as partners with Jesus we need to make sure we stay with him. Stay close to him…so close like an ox yoked or someone ready to run the 3-legged race! When we remain close, we’re in the place where we can receive what John the Baptist promised; *“He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 1:8 & John 1:33) May we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promise of blessing.

Challenge to bless others Alongside the blessing of his presence, now available to us in the Holy Spirit, Jesus challenges each of us, giving us the opportunity to do what John the Baptist did – to point others to Jesus. God doesn’t need humans (who are apt to being confused and suspicious!) to do his work. Jesus could have continued his ministry without help and yet he chooses ordinary people; disciples like suspicious Nathaniel to call others. The first disciples are a rag-tag bunch, not unlike us, and yet God chooses to partner with them (and us!) to build his kingdom. These first disciples bring their friends to Jesus; John the Baptist introduces Andrew (v 35-36); Andrew then introduces his brother Simon Peter (v41); and Philip introduces Nathaniel (v45). Most of us don’t see ourselves as great evangelists, we are often nervous to speak about our faith with others…we are not likely to become a great church builder and leader like Simon Peter. But maybe we could be like his lesser-known brother Andrew who introduces him to Jesus; ‘The first thing Andrew did was find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah (that is the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.’ (v42) You too can bring someone to Jesus! Maybe it will be as simple as Philip’s invitation to Nathaniel; “Come and see”; maybe point your neighbour to our online service! It’s mind-boggling that God is so gracious that he chooses to involve imperfect people, like you and me, in his perfect plan. As we point others to Jesus, we are taking up the challenge to bless others.

To finish I want to spend a moment looking at those words that Eli, urges Samuel to say when he next thinks God might be speaking; *“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” (1 Sam 3:9 & 10)*

Listening is a skill; we can learn to do it better. Hearing is different; we can hear the hum of a radio without really paying much attention; to listen we need to concentrate. I’m not saying it’s easy to listen to God but we can get better as we practice, as we pay attention, as we concentrate. Let our prayers not just be ‘shopping lists’ of things we feel God ought to be doing…let’s practice listening to Him. You might think our current circumstances, are too anxious to listen to God but maybe this is exactly the time God wants to speak…let us, like Samuel, be ready to listen. Over the next 7 weeks we are going to be using some really good resources from ‘Jesus Shaped People’ who’ve helped lots of churches to become closer followers of Jesus. The resources are called ‘Stay Alert to the Spirit’ and they aim to help us seek God’s path in troubled times. What might God be saying to us in this pandemic? I’d urge you to give this teaching priority over the next 7 weeks. There will be a Sunday talk, & chance to dig deeper on Mondays at 7.30pm on Zoom. Also Jenny is adapting some resources for anyone to use at home (especially those without the internet). There are even some short videos designed to teach across generations (ideal for families to use); we hope to put these on our website.

*Prayer: Thank you Lord Jesus that you call us to follow you and promise to stay with us. Help us to point others to you. And help us to listen to you, especially over these next 7 weeks. Amen.*

Notices – Remember the church building is closed but join us, if you, can online. The Sunday service is on our website from 10.30am. Zoom into the Bible is every Monday at 7.30pm and Wednesday Night Prayer also on Zoom at 7.30pm. Join us for Moring Prayer on facebook each Monday and Friday at 8.45am. For those not online please ask for a paper copy of the weekly sermon.

Soon we are going to be conducting a ‘Communication Audit’, a small team are going to ring everyone on our pastoral list to check how we’re looking after each other and how we’re helping each other to worship in these difficult times AND how we could improve. Thank you in anticipation of your willingness to take part.