

Following Jesus

South Yarra Community Baptist Church – 17 October 2021 – Elie Haddad

I would like to pick up on our last reading from Mark 10.

James and John come to Jesus with a request: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” A request that seems to be innocent. We all come to Jesus asking for things. After all, isn’t he the lord of our lives, the one responsible for our well-being? Whenever we have a difficulty, a situation, challenging circumstances, tense relationships, problems at work, problems at home, uncertain future, whatever our situation is. It is natural for us to come to Jesus with this request: “we want you to do something for us.”

We are currently going through very tough times in Lebanon. Political upheaval, economic meltdown, corrupt government, and more recently gunfire and clashes on the streets of Beirut. Instinctively, we go to Jesus with this same request several times a day. We need Jesus to protect us and to make things better for us.

In response to the request of James and John, Jesus probes further and responds with a question: “What is it you want me to do for you?”

The question that Jesus asks seems to be a common response for him. In the passage right after the one we read from Mark 10, we read the story of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus. Jesus comes into Jericho. Bartimaeus hears the crowd and knows that it’s Jesus coming in. He starts shouting and the crowd try to silence him. But Jesus seeks him out and asks him that same question: “what do you want me to do for you?”

“What do you want me to do for you?” Why does Jesus repeatedly ask this question? He must know the answer. He knows everything. I believe that by Jesus asking this question, he wants us to really think about what we want, and to think of our motives. Answering Jesus’s question reveals what we believe about him, about our condition, and about our relationship to him.

The answer of Bartimaeus reveals that he merely wants to see. A very legitimate request. Jesus came to give sight to the blind, he is blind, he wants Jesus to give him sight. He got his wish and a lot more.

The answer of James and John, on the other hand, reveals something different. They want to sit at Jesus’s right and left in glory. A seemingly innocent request, but behind it is the natural human desire for a place of honor, power, and prestige. Although Jesus does not rebuke them, he challenges them. Simply, Jesus did not come to earth seeking a place of honor, power, and prestige. He came to serve. This means that following Jesus is a journey of service and sacrifice, not a journey of honor and power.

If Jesus asks us the same question today: “what do you want me to do for you?” What will our answer be? Why do we come to Jesus? Why do we follow him?

Peter had to contend with what it means to follow Jesus. We read in Luke 5:1-11 about Jesus entering the boat that belongs to Peter. After teaching the crowds from the boat, Jesus made a request to Peter: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Peter answered: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." They did, and they caught so many fish that their nets started to break. They got help from the other boat with them, and the catch filled both boats.

When Peter saw that: "he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" This is a strange response. Peter is asking Jesus to get out of his boat. Why? We usually interpret this as a spiritual awakening for Peter. He suddenly realized who Jesus was.

I don't think so. In the previous chapter, Acts chapter 4, Luke tells us that people were already astounded by the teachings of Jesus because he spoke with authority, and we saw Jesus healing the sick (including Peter's mother-in-law) and casting out demons. Peter already knew what Jesus is capable of. I don't think that two boat-loads of fish were more spectacular than the teaching, healing, and casting out of demons that Peter had already witnessed.

I think that there's something else at play here. Peter was a fisherman. Jesus helped him in his enterprise that night. This is what happens when we ask God to bless our work and he does. We want him to follow us to keep blessing us. Peter may have had the same thoughts. Maybe he was thinking: "I wish Jesus can follow me to help me succeed." But one look from Jesus was enough. It became clear to Peter that either Jesus leaves his boat, or he will have to leave everything behind. And that is precisely what happened. Jesus asked Peter to leave everything and follow him. Peter did.

This happens to us all the time. Jesus comes into our lives with a special blessing. We want the blessing, but we want Jesus to step aside afterward. We will call him again when we need a new blessing. We know that if Jesus sticks around then he may expect us to do something different with the blessing, maybe give it away and bless others?

Peter may not have learned this lesson the first time around because we see the same fishing scene repeated after the resurrection of Jesus (John 21). That's when Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loved him or not. The first question was "do you love me more than these?" I believe that the "these" referred to the fish, the boat, and the tools of the trade. Jesus was asking Peter: do you love me more than you love the work that ensures your livelihood? Jesus made it clear to Peter that following him will lead to suffering, then asked him, again, to follow him. Peter did, this time knowing full well what the cost of following Jesus will be.

Why do we follow Jesus? What do we want from him? Do we want him because of the blessings, then want him to step aside until we need the next blessing? Or are we prepared to pay the cost of following Jesus and sharing in the fellowship of his suffering? What is our motivation for following Jesus?

At our seminary, we bring in students from all over the Arab world (Middle East, North Africa, and the diaspora) to teach them. We end up learning a lot from them. It is humbling to see the cost of following Jesus for many of them. We have the privilege of training students from a relatively safe place, and we love what we do. It's our students and graduates who have to pay a high price for their faith and their ministry. They know that if they preach Jesus they will likely face hardship and may end up in prison, and they still preach Jesus.

We have become accustomed to our comfortable lives. We have Jesus in our lives to make it better, but are we willing to sacrifice or suffer for Jesus? We have embraced elements of a prosperity gospel without even recognizing it. We think that by following Jesus, he is obligated to spare us from any suffering. Our life choices become the paths of least resistance. When we face hardship, we make corrections in our lives to escape the hardship and smooth out our life. We are always ready to "serve" within a safe and comfortable boundaries, but are we ready to serve when that comes at a cost?

Our students also teach us to read our Bible differently. For example, in Acts 12 we read about Peter in prison and the church praying for him to be delivered from prison. God did deliver him at night. Peter comes to the house where the church is gathered to pray. He knocks at the door, but they hesitate to open the door, not quite believing that it's Peter. We interpret this as lack of faith. They were praying for the release of Peter, he was released, but they were surprised that he was released.

However, if we go back to the text in Acts 12 and read it carefully, the text does not say that the church was praying for Peter to be delivered from prison. They were praying for Peter in prison. I don't think that they had the expectation that God was obligated to deliver him. Their expectation was, if they preach Jesus, they end up in prison. Even when the apostles were delivered, they went back to the streets preaching Jesus, until they got arrested again. Sometimes God intervened and he delivered them from prison, and he was glorified. Other times, God did not deliver them, and he was glorified nevertheless. The apostles preached Jesus in the streets, and they preached Jesus inside the prison. It didn't matter much to them. They understood their role and knew their priorities and loyalties.

Our expectation today is that God will deliver us from difficult circumstances and will spare us from any kind of pain and suffering. We learn differently from our students. Their experience resembles that of the New Testament church. They expect that their faith and ministry will be costly to them, and they are willing to bear that cost. They are not looking for an easy way out.

This is a big lesson for us today in Lebanon. As life gets a lot more difficult and complicated, with increasing instability and volatility, what do we do? We know that in the midst of all our crises, God is opening up new opportunities to proclaim the Gospel, to proclaim a message of hope in a place full of despair. The Gospel message is indeed penetrating new people groups that we had not thought possible, at least not in our lifetime. What do we do? Do we pick up and leave in pursuit of a more comfortable and stable life? Do we pursue

God's calling no matter what the circumstances are? These are big questions that we face every day.

Yes, life in Lebanon is very challenging these days. But not only in Lebanon. Our whole region is marked by instability, volatility, and many times extremism and even persecution. There is violence and division all over the world. But what we are currently experiencing in Lebanon is truly amazing. The situation is very bad. Yet, God is doing what he does best, redeeming the situation so that life springs out it. Out of darkness, the light of God is shining. Out of despair, God is giving hope. Out of violence, we are experiencing God's shalom. And all of that through his church, through the remnant whom God has called to faithful perseverance.

What we are experiencing in Lebanon is nothing short of remarkable. God transforming his church so that we can reach our neighbors with the love of God, regardless of whether our neighbors are friendly or hostile, or whether they love us back or not. What an incredible journey that God is taking us on. What precious lessons we are learning as a Lebanese church.

Jesus said in Luke 9:23, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." It's very simple. We either deny ourselves or deny Jesus. We cannot live for Jesus and live for ourselves at the same time. We cannot follow Jesus while we're holding a strong grip on our way of life. We cannot follow Jesus and stay where we are.

The call of Jesus to us tonight is: follow me. The big questions for each of us are, do I want to follow him, or do I want him to follow me? Why do I want to follow him? If Jesus asks me right now: "What do you want me to do for you?", what will my answer be? Will my answer be: "I want you to give me a comfortable life and a place of honor?", or will it be "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:19-20)?

I believe that these are important questions to ponder on as we partake in the Lord's table in a few minutes.