It’s about a year ago this weekend that I finally decided to follow Jesus. The common phrase when you become a Christian is ‘I found Jesus’ but that seems wrong to me because it sounds like He was hiding and I had to go and find him, like a game of hide and seek, when of course the truth is that He’s always been there, knocking on the door as it says in Revelation 3:20, and we just have to open up to Him.

In verses 57-62 of this passage, we see three interactions between Jesus and people who say they want to follow Him, and in Jesus’ response to each of them we learn something about what it means to truly follow Him.

You can imagine the excitement of the first man as he rushes up to Jesus and announces, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And then you can imagine his shock and confusion when Jesus replies, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

It’s not the answer you expect. When we think of religious leaders and pastors, we think of them wanting to grow their flock, welcoming in all comers with a smile and embrace. Imagine turning up at the Tab for the first time and saying ‘I want to follow Jesus’, and Simon saying ‘Er, are you sure about that?’

But, of course, Jesus is not turning this man away. What he’s doing is laying out the reality of following Him. This first man is an idealist – ‘I will follow you *wherever you go*’. We can be idealists about Jesus, about His perfect love for us, about our relationship with Him. But we can’t be idealists about what it means to be a Christian in this world. If we have the naïve view that once we follow Christ that suddenly all of our worldly troubles will disappear, we will only end up disappointed and disillusioned.

If anything, when you become a Christian you take on more troubles. You see the world with new eyes and therefore see wrongs and injustices that you never noticed before; you hold yourself to a higher standard and so are harder on yourself than you were before whilst paradoxically also knowing that you’re forgiven for your sins because of what Jesus did on the cross; and because our society today, like it was back when Jesus spoke to this man, is largely against Jesus, you open yourself to persecution.

So when Jesus says ‘the Son of Man has no place to lay his head’, he’s not telling this man not to follow Him, He’s saying ‘Follow me, but first understand the cost. If you think that following me means escaping from suffering in this world, then you really don’t understand my message at all.’

Then we see Jesus interact with two men who say they want to follow him but both put down conditions. The first man says “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Now in that culture at that time, if your father had just died or was about to die, you wouldn’t be out in the road following a stranger, you’d be at home at your father’s bedside, so I think it’s fair to believe that what this man was actually saying was ‘I will follow you but only after my father has died.’ Why? Because his father may not have approved. It’s a condition he places on following Jesus.

The second man says, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Like the first man, he’s saying he’ll follow Jesus but only with his family’s permission.

Jesus’ responses to both men may seem harsh on the surface. “Let the dead bury their own dead.” “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

But really what Jesus is saying is that if you want to follow Him, you can’t put anything or anyone else ahead of Him in your life. He has to be your Lord. You can’t look back at worldly things, you can’t be half-hearted in your relationship with Him, or you’re not with Him at all.

It’s so easy to slip into treating Jesus like a divine personal assistant, only reaching out to Him when you want Him to do something for you. If you truly understand what Jesus says about who He is, then you have to make him your Lord – the centre and purpose of your life. He becomes your life, not part of your life.

To put it another way, whatever your ifs or buts are, whatever your conditions are to following Jesus, those conditions are really the Lord in your life. If you say, I’ll follow you, Jesus, but first let me do what I need to do to get this promotion at work, then work is the Lord in your life, not Jesus. If you say, I’ll follow you, Jesus, if my family doesn’t oppose it, then your family is Lord in your life, not Jesus.

“Let the dead bury the dead.” If you put anything or anyone before Him, you’ll be dead. I know that sounds melodramatic but it’s true, because once you’ve experienced the wonder of life with Him first, of the Holy Spirit at your core and that sense of His love, then anything less than that feels like death.

Most people here today have been Christians a long time and you probably know what happens when you put Jesus second to something else in your life for a while. I’ve only been a Christian a year and I already know what happens when you put something else above Him. Doing that is part of being human and the power of the grip of the world we live in – sometimes, we can’t help it.

Let’s go back to the job example – let’s say you’re going for a promotion at work and that’s your main focus, you’re pouring all your energy into getting that job, but what happens when you **don’t** get the job? What happens when you **do** get the job but you find you’re still not satisfied with life, still yearning for more? You’re disappointed, disillusioned, angry.

Let’s say you put a relationship first – boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, you hold that person up as your Lord, as the meaning of your life; but what happens when they let you down? What happens when they don’t let you down, when they’re a wonderful partner in every way, but still you don’t feel satisfied with life?

We can have wonderful jobs, partners and children, but eventually we’ll still feel half-empty and rudderless if we don’t have Jesus at the heart of our life, if we don’t have that intimate relationship with our creator that we were all designed to have.

Only knowing Jesus, and giving your life to Him, can truly satisfy you, can give you a sense of joy and peace that transcends worldly things. We are spiritual creatures – just look at all of the different philosophies and enlightenment programmes out there in the world. We all have this deep craving for ***the answer*** to life. The answer is that we’re meant to follow Him.

The best proof of the power of Jesus is the empirical evidence we receive from hearing the testimonies of others, so I’ll give you a personal example.

As I said earlier, I finally embraced Jesus about a year ago now, and the way I came to Christ was through emotion – I felt Him in my heart way before my head fully registered what was happening to me. I spent days and weeks repeatedly in floods of tears – and I’m not someone who usually cries. I was overwhelmed by a sense of His unconditional love for me, His forgiveness for all the things I’d done wrong, and all I wanted to do was be close to Him.

There were certain songs I discovered that I knew were a gateway for me to be filled by the Holy Spirit – it was like a really weird, awful dance act, you know? Song comes on, Michael breaks down in tears.

But as that honeymoon period came to an end, as I became cemented in my faith and following Him became routine, my mind almost instinctively started to go back to the way I was before I decided to follow Him; I began to focus less on putting Him first every day, and without really thinking about it on a conscious level, I was once again putting worldly things first – and very quickly I began to feel the old discontent of my old life creeping back in.

Now, Jesus, knowing that I was a baby Christian and vulnerable to drifting away – or being pulled away, if you want to think about it as a spiritual battle – knew that I needed a lot of help to stop looking back and keep ploughing forward, and so he reached down and turned my head forward.

This is where the story gets a bit strange but bear with me. I was lying in bed one evening, not long after Christmas, and I must have been starting to sense that I was drifting back to my old ways, because I instinctively began to listen to some of those songs that had brought me so close to Jesus back in the summer and to try to find some new songs that had the same impact.

I remember that I had my eyes closed and, because there was a light on in the hallway, I could see those amber specks you see on the back of your eyelids, you know? And I was praying for the Holy Spirit to come, praying to know Jesus better, to feel Him in my heart again, and suddenly those specks on the back of my eyelids came together and took shape as a face and I knew in my heart unequivocally that I was seeing the face of Jesus. And the emotion that came over me, the sense of immense love and peace… well as many of you know, there are no words that can accurately describe that sensation.

Now, I know that sounds crazy. I know that if I’d been sitting where you are 13 months ago, listening to someone saying what I’m saying now, I’d dismiss them as deluded, as someone who’d had a psychosomatic experience - who’d tricked themselves into seeing what they wanted to see.

But as Christians we should expect these incredible encounters with Jesus. When we put Him first, He responds with a love so strong you can barely believe it.

But I’d be lying if I said that there haven’t been times, since then, when I’ve allowed worldly things to come before Him, and had to once again reset my mind and heart to put Him first, and I know that this is a continuous battle we all face because it’s part of our human nature to reject Him.

Right, I’m sure you’re all getting bored of my voice, but please allow me to make just one more point, and I think it’s a point that we sometimes overlook or don’t stress enough.

There’s a really simple message to the Gospel: We’re accepted into the Kingdom of God by Jesus despite our sins, and because we’re accepted we choose to obey His way. But, functionally, the way we are as humans, we find it really difficult to let go of the idea that it’s the other way round, that we have to obey first in order to be accepted. I suspect the last two men in Luke 9:57-62 had this misconception.

The gospel is that ‘I’m accepted through Christ therefore I obey’, not ‘I obey therefore I’m accepted’. What a beautiful, life-changing message. Why wouldn’t you want to put Jesus first?

Anyway, I’m certain you’ve all had enough of me rambling on now. So now we want to ask you all, round your tables, to think about what it is that you sometimes put before Jesus, and what you can do to help yourself put Him first.