

Practicing the Way: Apprenticeship to Jesus

Last Saturday's march, organised by Tommy Robinson, to 'Unite the Kingdom' in London which drew 150,000 people at least, had many Christians in it. I wrote about it in *Tab Matters* this week. A journalist asked them why they were on the march.

A consistent theme emerged from these bearers of the cross. They told him, David Campanale, they didn't feel listened to, that the political system excluded and belittled their concerns and that the sense of national crisis is such that only a Christian revival can fill the void.

David Campanale's favourite moment came from fourth-placed French presidential far-right candidate, Eric Zemmour. Telling the crowd "I have come here to London to convey to you the admiring greetings of the French", he added with a Pythonesque mistranslation, "I am happy to be among you. I am proud to be among this English people who are revolting."

Is this a revolution? What is to be made of the flags mixed with faith, actual fascist politicians being given a stage by Robinson and the failures of mainstream parties to address these concerns?

Tommy Robinson says he was part of a weekly 45 minute Bible study when serving time in prison, led by what he has described as a "lovely Asian pastor". He said, "I've gone through the Bible. And as I went through it, I realised everything is from the Bible. Every saying, everything, every part of what our country has been built has come from the Bible. And when did this country start to fall? When did it decay? When it lost its faith and identity."

Well I would question Robinson's interpretation of the Bible and what it means to follow the way of Jesus and brandish his cross. Violent talk will lead to violent actions and Jesus was a man of non-violence who famously loved his enemies.

*What does it mean to follow Jesus today? We are going to be looking at that topic this autumn in this sermon series based on the book and course *Practicing the Way* by John Mark Comer, a Christian pastor from the States.*

Comer prefers to use the term apprentice. Be an apprentice of Jesus. What does it mean to apprentice under Jesus?

The invitation of Jesus was not to convert to a new religion called Christianity. His primary invitation was 'come follow me'. Apprentice under me. Follow me in this new way of life called the kingdom of God. Over fifty times in the gospels Jesus uses the word – follow my the way, on the road , a journey or way of life you follow into the

kingdom of God - the rule, peace and presence of God. It takes practice. A lifetime of practice.

The early followers of Jesus were called the Way. We use the word Christian today but that was initially a negative word in the New Testament, a kind of a religious slur about those hostile to way of Jesus. Who do you think you are ? A mini messiah? It was a sarcastic term : You want to be Jesus! Later followers picked up this slur and said 'Yes we want to be like Christ'.

Now in the west the most common meaning of Christian is a negative one. It used to be someone who had certain beliefs and some basic doctrines, goes to church now and again and tries to be a good person. But now the shift is to see it with political overtones thanks to American Christians voting for Trump and being reactionary against changes in culture.

The New Testament has 269 times the use of the word disciple, compared with three times using the word Christian. The bible was written by disciples for disciples.

The Quiet Revival report that Rhiannon spoke about last week showed the end of cultural Christianity among younger people. They would not say they are Christian but don't go to church. They will only use the term if they are serious about following Jesus.

Greatest issue facing the church today is whether those who identify as Christians will become apprentices and practitioners of the way of Jesus. Move from 'Christian' to being a disciple.

In Jesus times people followed rabbis. They were called talmids - a student of a teacher or philosopher. But as soon as you think student you import a western view of student. Learn through books etc. A better word is apprentice. Think of being a mechanic, a plumber, a carpenter – learning from a teacher. Not just information about how to be a plumber or a mechanic, but how to become a type of person like your teacher and do what your teacher does. Not classroom learning and information based.

Jesus takes disciples to watch him and do what he does. It's a participatory style of learning - relational, yes its cognitive - you do have to think, but it is embodied, holistic, practice based.

Everyone is a disciple of something. We live in a culture where novelty is more valued . Radical individualism is a defining trait today. We hold to the myth of the self-made

person. There are powerful forces in wider culture promoting this because so much money is to be made. Subscriptions, books, fashion, tech, every one wants to be a leader not a follower. We are told to be true to ourselves. To find ourselves.

Listen if I was true to myself I would be a selfish mean-spirited angry man. I see in Jesus someone who I want to be like, to save me from myself. There is something about him that despite my scepticism and my inner doubting Thomas, says 'yes. You have the words and the way of eternal life' – a quality of life I want to be transformed to.

No one starts from nothing. We are all influenced by something or someone.

We are all disciples following something or someone. What do we want to become and what life do we want to live. What path do you follow and who do you trust is the key issue. Your rabbi is what source of wisdom and insight are you going to trust.

There is a gap between identifying as a Christian and actually following Jesus. For many decades now the gospel has been laid out in such a way that you can become a Christian without becoming a disciple. Do you believe Jesus is Lord. Do you believe you're going to heaven when you die. Then you're in! Jesus has saved you from your sins you don't have to do anything.

We are so concerned about 'earning or salvation that we put the emphasis on this being a free gift and we don't have to make any effort. Jesus didn't go round beating people up over self-effort. Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Don't conflate the two.

It's a tragic split -considered secondary option actually following the way of Jesus. It is not getting converted and get saved (in the past tense). Salvation is way wider than that. Come and follow me. The gap is part of people's disillusionment with church and faith. They don't see the authenticity and integrity.

Salvation is not so much not about us getting to heaven. But about getting heaven into us.

In CS Lewis' Screwtape Letters, Wormwood is the apprentice demon and Screwtape tells him when someone converts don't worry about it. All of their habits are still in our favour. If we still own the way they are living'. They may say they are Christian but you wouldn't know it from how they live.

Conversion moments are important but it is meant to be the start of new life, a journey, becoming a new person over decades. The start of a process of transformation.

How define apprenticeship to Jesus. Anyone who organised their life around three basic goals. Be with Jesus, become like Jesus, do as Jesus did.

Jesus didn't invent discipleship. It was woven into their world at the time. It was the highest form of Jewish education. Children were taught from a young age to memorise the Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. The best of the best would go on to follow the rabbi and learn more and eventually become a rabbi themselves.

In comparison there is the radical invitation from Jesus 'whoever wants to be my disciple'.... This is not elitist.

I had time with my eldest daughter last weekend as I took her on to London and the next stage in her life and career. She has been doing a PHD at Oxford University. During that time she was asked to sit in on selection interviews for students to Oxford. These were the brightest and best of the country. Over 60% of Oxford students come from private schools which educate about 10% of the population. They are regularly trained and prepared for the gruelling Oxbridge interviews and have a massive advantage over state school educated students. It is not a level playing field. Sobering to think as Universities start up over the next couple of weeks.

Jesus doesn't do elitism. '**Whoever** wants to be my disciple'

Whoever WANTS TO.

This is the language of intentionality. It calls a person to be intentional about orienting their life to apprenticeship to Jesus.

All of our lives are oriented around something. Eg your career. Health and wellness . sport. Food, addictions. Is it giving you life? Is it forming you into person you deeply desire to become?

All these desires only find rightful place under our deepest desire: union with God- a deep experience of love so transcendent and beyond us.

In our society there is a romance obsession, a sexual obsession: trying to be accepted, to be one, to have union, to be intertwined with another.

Our faith says ultimately that is a striving for union with God.

Psychiatrist Curt Thompson said 'We are born looking for someone looking for us – will someone look at me'. The desire of the infant is look at me for love.

No human being touches that: the best lover, best parent - always something deeper. Paradox is that we always want more -never satisfied. Seeking God. Those pure joy and intimate moments with God. We want more. Thrilled at sunrises does not stop those beautiful feelings. We want this. Having depth relationships and conversations gives us a longing to be known and to know deeply.

We have a desire to be pervaded by love and goodness. Eulogy virtues at a funeral does not brag about people's career but the measure of love in their relationships .

Who do I want to be as an old man or an old woman. Yet we are obsessed with being youthful. Clutching at the first half of life. Success, wealth, beauty are the usual resume virtues.

When we seek an imitation of Jesus we want to be honest that want to look at life from the end. Destination of the journey naming where going. Start with the end in mind. Want to live for what matters most. Love and relationships. But have other desires in me success desire. May say no to some desires and pursue deepest desire.

Do as he did. Steve Jobs famously said 'Make a dent in the universe' don't just be a carbon footprint or consumer. Do you want to matter. We are made to make the world better. Created by God to be stewards of creation, to make it more Eden like.

Come follow me says Jesus. Whoever you are. Simon and Andrew were fishermen. They were not the brightest of the bright. They were common folk. They wouldn't be getting degrees and applying for Oxford or Cambridge. But Jesus invited them to become his apprentices. Before they believed in him, Jesus believed in them.

Jesus believes in you. Come and follow.