

TOGETHER

Welcome to the twice a month new look Together, it is smaller, has less frills and we would love to have your feedback, if it works for you. Largely the new format of Together will be a worship at home resource devised from a service the previous week. This week Revd Nathan has prepared the service material from the services he led at Hope Community and at Charles Street.

Following Jesus: It's not always going to be easy

Call to worship

Come and hear the words of Jesus:
 some are hard, some are for us as individuals,
 some are for us as a community;
 some are challenging, some are reassuring,
 some are difficult to understand,
 some we would rather not hear.

But come as you are and be bold,
 for Jesus wants to speak to you today
 words of truth, words of direction, words of love.

Hymn Be still, for the presence (SOF 40/StF 20)

*Readings Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
 Luke 14:25-33*

Hymn Speak, O Lord (SOF 2032/StF 161)

Sermon

Would I have answered when you called, 'come follow, follow me!?' Would I at once have left behind both work and family? Or would the old, familiar round have held me by its claim and kept the spark within my heart from bursting into flame?

Would I have followed where you led through ancient Galilee, on roads unknown, by ways untried, beyond security? Or would I soon have hurried back where home and comfort drew, where truth you taught would not disturb the ordered world I knew?

StF 674 | Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr

Today we are faced with reflecting on discipleship and the cost of following Jesus with the reality that it is not always going to be easy.

In our reading from Luke's gospel Jesus is addressing the crowds that have been following him: to discover whether they are following the latest craze, or whether they are really committed; he is looking for dedicated discipleship not popularity. And so he addresses, not his disciples, but the surrounding enthusiasts challenging them, and you and me, it's all or nothing!

Jesus uses startling language to demonstrate the point: *'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.'*

You may think that Jesus never said these words because they seem to go against everything that Jesus taught, he called people to love their enemies and so not loving family just seems wrong! However, it is because of Jesus teaching to love everyone that his words here bring a greater challenge!

In New Testament times *hate* was used as a comparative term, to demonstrate a priority of relationship, and to mean 'to love less.' The commentator Leon Morris has written "Jesus' meaning is surely that the love the disciple has for him must be so great that the best of earthly loves is hatred by comparison." This therefore reminds us that true discipleship demands that following Jesus is our number one priority, it is not on your own terms or at your own convenience, it is the narrow door of commitment! To follow Jesus means to follow Jesus, not anyone or anything else. For a disciple is a learner, and the primary teacher in life is Jesus.

It calls for a commitment that is life-long and is whole life, there are no restricted areas where God is not allowed. It is a commitment that needs to be cross shaped; reaching up to God and out to the world, that God's love and grace may be known and shared with a commitment that may demand everything, our life, our soul, our all.

Jesus goes on to say: *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

The message does not get more cuddly or comforting; discipleship and the cross are intrinsically linked as we are all called to daily die to self to our own motivations that we may live each day for Jesus, obedient to his will and way.

Being prepared to carry the cross is also being prepared for persecution and trials, the risks and the dangers. New Testament followers would have known about the Roman practice of crucifixion and the way that criminals bore their cross to the site of their death. Carrying the cross, will lead to death, but after death comes resurrection.

Then Jesus gives us two illustrations, one about building a tower and making the proper plans and preparations before beginning to build, and the second about a king who before waging war, plans a strategy.

Both are encouraging Jesus' hearers and us today to engage our brains, our reason. Jesus does not call us to follow blindly or without question, but to use all that we have in the service of him.

Methodism has favoured a balance between scripture, tradition, reason and experience when exploring theology and the four apply no less when exploring how we live out our lives and live out what we believe.

Discipleship is serious business to Jesus. To be a disciple, we must count the cost. So are we spectators or recruits? Are we disciples, willing to take up the cross? Do we take the call and the cost of discipleship seriously?

I recognise that I have not always been the follower of Jesus that I am called to be and our reading from Psalm 139 reminds us that we have a God who knows us fully and we cannot hide anything from him. There can be no pretence, no masks, no putting on a happy face, no escaping from God.

We serve a God who is always with us, who loves us unconditionally, who longs for us to be truly who we are created to be. In Christ, God calls us and by the Holy Spirit God equips us.

Life can be hard, and the life of following Jesus can be difficult too. Today we may feel that we have been brought up short, that our discipleship is not what it should be, and as a consequence we are not growing and becoming the people that God calls us to be.

God is gracious and compassionate, and through the cross of Christ our priorities can be corrected and we can be forgiven.

Today, may we be prepared to do business with God, that our lives may be changed and transformed that we may be disciples, obedient God's will and way.

In the words of Charles Wesley: *"Let us take up the cross, till we the crown obtain; and gladly reckon all things loss, so we may Jesus gain."*

Lord of the cross, you call us to follow you.
We mouth a yes and nod an okay,
but do we know what you've asked us to do?
We're to love you more than others?
Some say that cross is too heavy.
Still, you compel us to follow, knowing that this cross is too heavy for us to carry alone.
You say, count the cost and consider what discipleship is. Sometimes we squirm and say the cost is too great and the sacrifices too numerous.
Still, you compel us to follow.
The cross you ask us to carry is not nearly as heavy as the cross you carried for us.
Nevertheless, we complain – and you listen.
We search for an easier alternative – and you watch us.
God, help us to admit when we get frustrated by the enormity of discipleship.
Extend grace and mercy toward us.
Wrap us inside of your unconditional love.
And patiently compel us to follow you again. Amen.

Kwasi Kena, The Africana Worship Book for Year C, Valerie Bridge man-Davis & Safiyah Fosua, eds., (Discipleship Resources, 2008), 133.

Hymn Have you heard God's voice (StF 662)

Prayers for others | adapted from Roots

Loving Lord your compassion knows no bounds and you care for every part of the globe; we pray for those suffering as a result of floods especially the people of Pakistan.

Give wisdom to the government as it seeks to implement a recovery programme and give generosity to other nations that they may support its endeavours.

You call us to bear our crosses, give those who need it: strength to bear their crosses and wisdom to know the way forward.

Loving Lord you are the Prince of Peace, we pray for an end to all violence and warfare throughout the world.
We hold before you those who are suffering as a result of war; those who have lost loved ones those who have been injured, those who have lost homes and livelihoods, those who are fearful.
We especially ask for your comfort and strength for the peoples of Ukraine and Iraq.

You call us to bear our crosses, give those who need it: strength to bear their crosses and wisdom to know the way forward.

Holy God, we pray for our nations at this time.
We pray for our new Prime Minister Liz Truss, and for the new government.
We pray that they may discover how to use all available resources to meet the needs of those who are struggling with the cost of living, and so many other challenges facing our world.

You call us to bear our crosses, give those who need it: strength to bear their crosses and wisdom to know the way forward.

Loving Lord, you call your church to be your hands, and your feet, to embody your love.
At this time of new beginnings we pray for ministers who are starting a new appointment, we pray especially for Helen Cameron and Andy Fyall in their new roles of Chair and Deputy Chair.
Pour out your Holy Spirit on your church that our discipleship may be renewed and revived.

You call us to bear our crosses, give those who need it: strength to bear their crosses and wisdom to know the way forward.

Loving Lord you teach us to love one another, we pray for those who carrying having burdens at this time, those separated from loved ones, those in hospital those waiting for tests, those struggling with the ever rising cost of living

Loving Lord, grant to all who are struggling the knowledge of your encouraging presence, the aid of your strength and the power of your peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Hymn O Jesus, I have promised (SOF 418/StF 563)

Blessing

May God strengthen our hands to serve, embolden our lives to God's glory, and grant us each wisdom, humility and joy as we journey, taking up the cross and following Jesus. Amen.