

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> May

Acts 9:1-20

Revelation 5:11-end

John 21:1-19

“Follow me”

When we apply for a new job our application form is the place where we list our experience, the things we have done in the past, our qualifications, our expertise and skills relevant to the post we are hoping to get. And at the interview – should we be successful in getting one – although we may talk about what we hope to do in the role, and how we might plan to achieve this, much of our time will be spent talking about what we have already done – proving that we are a good fit for the position. That we have what it takes and can demonstrate this by what we have achieved in the past.

I recall once I was part of a panel interviewing someone for a job in a school. This job would involve them having to handle some of the most difficult students, some of whom were far from polite – sometimes downright abusive. It needed someone who could cope with that kind of situation without getting flustered.

So, we asked, can you give us an example of how you have coped in a pressurised situation in the past. The interviewee then told us a story of when she was working as a teller in a high street bank. A young man came into the bank wearing a balaclava and brandishing a shot gun. He approached the desk where she was working and demanded she hand over the money. (we were all ears at this point of her tale – just how had she handled this situation?) She continued. “I said to him – You silly boy, don’t be so stupid – give me that gun” and he did. He was so phased by her presence of mind and calmness he meekly handed over the gun. (Needless to say she got the job – I think she’s still working in the school now some fifteen years later!)

But a question I want us to ponder for a short while this morning before moving on to what God has in store for us is this – would we have given Peter or Paul the job that God gave to them?

They became the two main leaders of the early Christian church. Read through the Acts of the Apostles and you will see story after story about Peter and Paul. How they led others in proclaiming the Christian message and spreading it throughout the Middle East and Europe. How much of the growth and spread of Christianity was down to them – their faith, their determination, their

willingness to go anywhere – even to suffering – for the sake of the Christian message

But remember we have Peter – impetuous, outspoken, foolish in word and action. And most importantly found wanting in a crisis – as he denied even knowing Jesus on the night of his arrest. Hardly the track record of a Church Leader.

And Paul. Persecutor of the church; someone who stood by as he watched Stephen stoned to death for his faith in Jesus; someone who travelled the land rooting out Christians and having them thrown into jail or worse. Surely not the person to lead the church in its mission.

And yet these were the people God chose to take his church forward. He looked to the future and saw their potential, whereas our natural inclination is to look to the past and judge from that.

And its not just these two. We can see throughout the Bible that God has always been in the business of using flawed individuals to fulfil his purposes.

Abraham – yes, known as the friend of God but also one who on many occasions failed to trust in God and took matters into his own hands. Telling people Sarah was his sister, not his wife in order to escape a difficult situation; having a child by Sarah's slave girl because Sarah was not conceiving – it seemed that God was taking too long to fulfil his promise.

Moses – again he had the closest of relationships with God, and yet this came after he murdered someone and fled the land to avoid the consequences, and after he came up with excuse after excuse as to why he shouldn't be the one to lead Israel

David – the most successful of the Kings. A man whose faith in God shows clearly through the psalms he wrote and the things he did. But a man who took a fancy to another man's wife and arranged for him to be killed on the battlefield so that he could have her.

And yet these are the kinds of people God used to do great things.

Thinking about these biblical heroes – Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul and others - helps us to see one of the central truths of the Christian gospel, but one which we often forget. We are not defined by our pasts – God is more concerned about our futures.

Sadly I sometime hear people say that they are not good enough to come to church. Sad because in reality none of us are. We are all flawed individuals, dependent on God's forgiveness and God's grace to lead us on. Grace which will enable us not to be haunted by our pasts, but to learn from them; Not to be held back by our pasts but to spurred on by his love and forgiveness; not to think that things will always be as they have always been but to look in hope to the new future he will lead us into and empower us to live in.

At the end of the story of Peter's encounter with Jesus on the beach after the amazing catch of fish; after the breakfast by the fire and after the "do you love me?" questions, Jesus says to Peter "follow me"

He says the same to you and to me today.

Follow me. Leave the past behind and look to the future. Learn from the past and use what you have learned to create a new future with my help (and that last bit – Gods help – is all important. We cannot do this ourselves. We are fools of we believe we can)

For Peter, this wasn't the first time Jesus had said those words "follow me". It wasn't the first time Peter had responded. It is all very reminiscent of a scene on the lakeshore some three years earlier when Jesus had first called Peter and the others to follow him.

But now things were different. Peter wasn't the same person. He had seen some wonderful things. He had heard Jesus' teaching and marvelled at it. He had walked alongside God himself. He had seen his hopes dashed as Jesus was arrested. He had reached a low point when warming himself by another fire as he denied even knowing Jesus. He had thought it was all over. But those experiences had helped to make him into the person that he could now be – the rock on which Jesus would build the church. Wiser, stronger, more willing and able to trust God for the future because he had been with him through the past. Ready now to take those steps to follow Jesus once again.

And likewise Jesus calls us to follow him. You and me. And, like Peter, this will be a call that will be repeated and repeated. He calls us on a journey. A journey which will last throughout our lives. A journey through good times and bad times. A journey where we might take wrong turnings, before hearing his call to follow again. A journey where we might forget him and turn away at times, but where he will call us back to follow him once more. A journey where we will learn new things and new truths about God and about ourselves as we grow in knowledge, understanding and faith. A journey though where he will be alongside us wherever we are and whatever we do.

A journey which we take not on our own, but together. Look around. These are our fellow travellers. These are the folk we can learn from together. These are the folk with whom we can grow in our understanding of what faith is and who God is (and for that matter who we are). These are the people who will stand alongside us when things get tough and rejoice with us when things go well. These are the ones we can support in their concerns and celebrate with them in their joys. These are our fellow travellers as part of God's people here in Shirley. Look at them; pray for them; walk with them.

None of us is perfect. None of us deserves to be on this journey with God. None of us knows all (or perhaps even any) of the answers. We are all travelling together in God's strength, confident of his love and dependent on his grace. We will be thinking more about God's grace this evening at Reflective Worship at St John's – please come along to hear more.

But today as we have our annual meeting and think about where God might be leading our churches – what our particular journey might be like over the next few years – let us remember that call he made to Paul and to Peter and to countless millions through the ages. That call he made to each one of us. Follow me. And let us be prepared to say yes Lord – we will follow wherever you lead us.

And so we pray:

God of our lives  
you are always calling us  
to follow you into the future,  
inviting us to new ventures, new challenges,  
new ways to care,  
new ways to touch the hearts of all.  
When we are fearful of the unknown, give us courage;  
when we worry we are not up to the task,  
remind us that you would not call us  
if you did not believe in us.  
When we get tired,  
or feel disappointed with the way things are going,  
remind us that you can bring change and hope  
out of the most difficult situation.  
And when we feel alone,  
help us to remember there are fellow travellers on the journey,  
who will support us and encourage us – as we will them.  
Amen