

Sermon: Sun 17 March 2019 St John's Westport. Luke 9:18-27

“**Jesus calls us to Radical Commitment**” – that was the sermon topic set for this morning. I’ve wrestled with whether it is the right thing to preach on, given that we are all reeling from the horror of Friday’s terror attacks in Christchurch. I’ve wondered whether there was something different that we needed to hear today.

Like many of you, no doubt, I’ve been following news coverage and the responses from friends, family, worldwide leaders, the general public...

I’ve felt teary, and angry, and deeply saddened, and numb, and despairing... but I have also felt encouraged and hopeful by the immediate responses from so many New Zealanders – both at a national leadership level, and at a local community level. Many have spoken clearly of their support and love and compassion for the Muslim community and their abhorrence of this evil attack. Many have quoted Martin Luther King Jr’s words:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness – only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate – only love can do that.

Light... Love... And we know the true source of both of those.

I’ve wondered too whether I needed to avoid the word ‘radical’ – given that it can so easily be associated with extremist behaviour.

But as I’ve prayed and tried to listen to what the Spirit is whispering to my heart and soul, I’ve realised that a “radical commitment” to Jesus’s call is **exactly** what is required of us – and most especially in the wake of this particular attack. Because a radical commitment to Jesus implies that we know **God is Sovereign; that love conquers all evil; and that the story is not yet finished.** As we are overwhelmed with questions and heartbreak, let us hear Jesus’s powerful words in John 16:33, coming at the end of 3 chapters of life-changing truth, and encouragement and promises – he says this: “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” – the Jesus we are committed to promises that we will have MANY trials and sorrows. But he also reminds us that he has overcome the world. This is our hope. This is

what sets us apart. This is what leads us out of fear & darkness, and into His marvellous light.

Jesus himself was the target of acts of hate & undeserved violence. We know that these attacks on two Muslim places of prayer & worship are not the first of their kind in the world. We know that it doesn't appear to matter to those who carry out such attacks, which faith you follow: there is no respect for religious freedom or for a sacred place of worship being a safe sanctuary – we have read and heard numerous times, of attacks around the world on synagogues, churches, temples, and mosques.

And now it has happened in our own country.

Here is an interesting and confronting comment I read yesterday:

Hearing people say "this isn't our New Zealand" makes me want to scream and cry and pull my hair out. It is our New Zealand. Hearing those kinds of statements (from Pākehā) makes my blood boil. Look outside your bubble. Find out what life is like for people who don't look or sound or pray like you. Don't let the reality of the world surprise you, because for lots of people, that reality is inescapable.

Call out islamophobia. Call out racism. Help people understand what life is like for other people. Help create empathy and compassion. Make our world safer.

This comment made me pause.

This IS our human reality. In any and every place. Why? Because whether we like it or not, there is inherent sinfulness within each human person. There is the potential for hate and selfishness and greed and lack of compassion and extremist behaviour.

But we must remember that ***our fight is not against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)***

Here is how a friend and minister in Chch put it:

We're all sinners, but this act has shown us something pretty close to pure, unvarnished evil—with the last vestiges of common grace almost completely stripped away. And it's happened right on our doorstep.

I'm as thankful as can be to know there's a God of perfect justice, and that one day he will dispense his perfect justice towards those responsible,

whatever that ends up looking like. If I'm angry, how angry must the perfectly holy God be?

And it's this perfectly holy God who calls us to a 'radical commitment' to his Son Jesus.

The definition of the adjective **radical** in the Oxford Dictionary:

'relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; far-reaching or thorough.' (REPEAT)

So we could talk about a thorough commitment; a far-reaching commitment; or we could say the fundamental nature of our commitment is affected if we are calling it radical. That sounds to me like the commitment we hear Jesus describing in the Bible.

Turn with me to p1148 – Luke Ch 9. This passage includes:

- Two questions from Jesus;
- A declaration from Peter of who Jesus is;
- Jesus's own prediction of his death, and then;
- Jesus's deeply challenging call to any who want to be his followers:

“Who do **you** say I am?” – Jesus asks his disciples a very personal question, and I believe he asks each one of us the same question:

Who do you say I am?

We **MUST** truly wrestle with our answer to that question. Because if we say – like Peter – that he is Jesus, the Messiah – sent from God – and if we are choosing to follow him, then we are saying yes to a radical commitment.

Jesus spells out for them what it means for HIM to be radically committed to His Father's call – he predicts his own suffering and death and resurrection. And then he explains what it **actually means** to be his follower. Listen to his words as recorded in v23 - 26:

'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is

ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels.'

This way of Jesus requires denial - turning from our selfish ways; and taking up our cross daily; and following Jesus. It requires standing up when it is not popular; caring for those who are unlovable or unloving; speaking out on issues of justice when it could cost us dearly; giving generously even when it hurts; not being ashamed of Jesus or His message. It also requires us to respond to hate with love.

We know that our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church in many parts of the world are daily asked to give up security, family, health services, jobs, homes, even their lives – because they choose to follow Jesus.

We may be tempted to 'sugar-coat' it for those who are seeking, but this is NOT an easy road. Following Jesus is Radical. It requires Commitment.

Listen to some of the radical ideas Jesus teaches.... A few chapters earlier in Luke (Ch 6:27) we read these words from Jesus:

“But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you.”

And then again in verse 35:

“Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.”

I've seen many prayers for the families & friends of the victims, for the police and other first responders, for those caring for the injured and distressed, for the Muslim Community as a whole... and this is right. But I have heard very few prayers for the attackers. That would be radical. It is painful and costly and altogether uncomfortable to follow Jesus.

Think about the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan – a story about going above and beyond to help someone from a different culture and religion as an example of what it means to truly love your neighbour?

These are instructions for living that could clearly be classed as radical.

They would have been extremely surprising to those hearing them in Jesus day, and they can be just as surprising to those living alongside us here in NZ.

We could reflect on a radical commitment to justice, and freedom for the oppressed – listen to what the prophet Isaiah says:

Isaiah 61:1-2 “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the broken-hearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord’s favour has come, and with it, the day of God’s anger against their enemies.”

In recent weeks I know you’ve been looking at Jesus’s mission strategy, according to Luke Chapters 8 & 9:

You have heard that:

1. Jesus says there is Good Soil
2. Jesus doesn’t just have followers, he has family
3. He casts out the powers of darkness
4. He has great power to heal
5. He commissions others for mission
6. He takes the small amount we have and multiplies it

We have been reminded that we are all learners; and that Jesus took his disciples WITH him – they watched, they learned, and then they were encouraged to give it a go. We are all – together – on God’s team. And we are all – together – dependant on God. Jesus WANTS to involve us – he multiplies what we offer freely. These are all great encouragements for us at such a time as this.

BUT – he requires a radical commitment. Being a disciple is costly.

So if it isn’t costing us anything – are we truly living as a disciple??

The passage in Luke 9 is followed by the transfiguration – and God’s declaration of who Jesus is:

‘This is My chosen Son – listen to Him’

Are we listening to Jesus?

The discipleship hymn (we will sing later in the service) – interesting that an American choral director wanted to amend the words of the chorus: instead of ‘embrace the pain and sorrow’ - **embrace God’s love and sorrow**. Which seems to change the meaning entirely – it’s OUR pain and sorrow that we are asked to embrace – the costly part of following Christ. The path that will cost you much!

It will be different for each one of us – but also similar – we are asked to deny ourselves. Not in the sense that we see ourselves as worthless – far from it – we are valuable and precious. But in the sense of denying our selfish ways.

The disciples gave up their source of income, a regular home, perhaps the chance to have a spouse? Children? We don’t know – we do know that many followers of Jesus were imprisoned, beaten, stoned, accused, attacked...

As a follower of Jesus I may be asked to give up food, sleep, warmth, my bed, comfort, financial security, physical security, independence, bank account, health, children, spouse, friends, a home, job prospects, sporting achievements, career options.... I may be asked to come regularly to worship without my spouse or my children. I may be ostracised in my community for choosing to stand up for Christ and speak out for Truth. I may be ridiculed in my workplace or in my home. I may be asked to give up my pride or forgive someone for hurting me – especially within the family of God.

I can’t tell you what God is saying to YOU, in particular. What I do know is that He is speaking. The question is whether we are listening.

Recently I agreed to become a patron for our local branch of ‘Voice for Life’ – because God has been laying on my heart for many months the urgent reality that life is increasingly under-valued in mainstream society – the unborn, the elderly & infirm, the high incidence of suicide amongst young people in particular – and that we HAVE to make a difference as disciples of Jesus. I was a bit hesitant to get involved, but I can’t deny what the Lord is saying to me.

Another very current and divisive reality in the Anglican church in NZ is the debate over the blessing of same-sex relationships – and many have felt that God is calling them to leave the NZ Anglican church structures to make a stand for Truth. Perhaps we know someone who is same-sex attracted: do you think the cost of following Christ, for them, would entail celibacy? The same way that it entails celibacy for a single person who is following Christ – many of my friends who are single long to be in relationships, but they will not bow to worldly pressure to have casual one-night stand relationships. We are not to buy into the myth that we are only properly fulfilled people if we are sexually active.

These are not popular positions. And you may not agree with me. That's between you and the Lord to work out! As for me – I don't see Jesus giving his disciples permission to follow worldly patterns. Far from it. Let's take a look at the passage in Philippians, written by Paul - a man originally called Saul who was most noted for his hatred of Christians. He believed the teachings of Jesus violated Mosaic Law and zealously harassed, and even jailed, anyone who followed those teachings. He was an aggressive persecutor of Christians in Jerusalem. But then he has a life-changing encounter while he is on the road to Damascus for the sole purpose of imprisoning more followers of Christ. He becomes a radically committed follower of Jesus. And now we read in Phil 3:17 'pattern your lives after mine' - 'learn from those who follow our example'

- Who do **we** 'pattern our lives' after? Whose example are we following? And do we realise that others may be following OUR example??

In v18 we read: there are many whose **conduct** shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ.

What does it mean to be an enemy of the cross?

- Their god is their appetite;
- They brag about shameful things
- They think only about this life here on earth;
- They are headed for destruction.

We have seen a stark example of those 'who brag about shameful things' in the fact that the terrorist live-streamed his attack online.

v20 BUT we are ***citizens of heaven*** – we are ***eagerly waiting*** for him to return.

Yes – Come, Lord Jesus! Our hearts cry out – we are ready!!!

So if there are many whose CONDUCT shows they are enemies of the cross... **what does my conduct show???**

There was a question I heard many years ago: *if you were ever accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you??*

Sobering stuff!

A few verses later in Philippians chapter 4:8-9 we read this:

“And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me – everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.”

A reminder to us, when we are tempted to despair, to set our minds on things that are true and pure and lovely and excellent and worthy of praise.... Not to linger on the horrors we see all around us. Commit to continuing to praise God for who He is, and for what He has done. Listen to and sing hymns and songs of praise. Exhort others to look to Jesus. Read the promises in scripture. (you may want a copy of some helpful scriptures to encourage you – that were used after the events of 9-11)

Matt will confirm that I'm not a gardener, but when I look at my neighbour's garden, I can tell what trees she has growing there simply because of the fruit I see on them...

What fruit can be seen in your own life?

Just to clarify – I am speaking from a place of battle - I struggle with impatience, slothfulness, greed, a critical nature, anger, envy, being irritable...

But we read in Galatians, the **fruits of the spirit** are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. (Today at Messy Church we will be looking at Kindness.)

Am I filled with joy? Or am I grumpy / negative / complaining?

Do I walk in freedom? Am I loving? Do I speak up for the widow, orphan, fatherless, voiceless....?

My family can tell you the truth about my behaviour – I struggle to deny myself daily!!!

Returning to the passage in Luke – Jesus’s question and challenge is that if I say with my mouth that He is the Christ, then how do I live? What do my actions say? Whose example am I following?

How do I - as a Christ follower – respond to what has happened in Chch? Where is my focus? Am I hopeful? Do I point to Christ? Do I continue to praise God?

This may sound terribly challenging, perhaps even convicting. I’ve certainly felt both convicted and challenged this past week. But there is GOOD NEWS!

Jesus calls his disciples to this costly path... and then he makes this astounding promise in v24: *but if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.* v25 *What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?*

Jesus asks us to look with different lenses... eternal lenses. This world is NOT all there is. He **also** promises to:

- Never forsake us
- Send the comforter, the Holy Spirit, to guide and direct us into all truth
- Give us authority over all the power of the enemy
- Hear us when we pray
- Give us everything we need
- Give us the words to say when we need to defend ourselves

Specific Application

As we continue to reflect and respond to the attacks in Chch, I encourage you to **spend time in listening prayer and reading the scriptures** this week – and throughout lent – continually asking the question:

What is God saying to me?

And then I encourage you to **tell someone else** about what God is saying to you, and ***what you’re going to do about it!***

It could be about taking a stand with a family member about saying grace before a meal, even if that's not normally their thing.

It could be a commitment to try praying out loud with another person, even when that's not something you feel comfortable doing.

Or perhaps it is asking 'shall we pray about that right now?' when you've been in discussion with fellow believers about something that troubles you or them.

Or choosing not to be glued to the television or social media coverage.

Or making a commitment to tithe a regular amount towards the Lord's work – either here, or through a Christian organisation that God has laid on your heart.

Or stopping yourself when you find you're slipping into negativity or criticism, and finding something true or joyful to say instead

Or writing to your local MP about an issue that God has laid on your heart

Or becoming a member of an organisation like ***Voice for Life***, to contribute in some way to the fight for Life in NZ; or ***Voice of the Martyrs*** – to be better informed about the persecuted church and inspired to follow Christ

Or choosing to spend time talking with someone you usually avoid

Or taking time to invite someone for a coffee/meal (your shout) to bless them and encourage them

Or making an effort to be gentle with your children or grandchildren – and taking time to just play

Or revitalising the focus on cross-cultural or local mission

Or inviting a friend / colleague / tourist to church?

Being committed to buying fair-trade or eco-friendly products?

Jesus calls us to radical commitment.

What is God saying to me?

What am I going to do about it?