

Follow the one who calls - a sermon by Michael Palmer

Taken alone, the theme today is extremely bad advice!

I saydo not follow the one who calls! Unless:

1. The one who calls has a proven track record with you.
2. There is a clear and compelling evidence of a need to follow - i.e. an obvious danger will result if you don't follow.
3. You have tested the wisdom of proceeding where she/he calls us to.

This is very important at present why?

In times of uncertainty when the anxiety is high it is very tempting to assess leaders by the confidence they exude or the 'clear solutions' they espouse. Indeed, in times of uncertainty the simple slogans, clear 'black and white' choices, become most appealing.

The principle goes like this:

When certainty, my contentment with my world, is high then I need spend less energy on surviving. I then have a greater capacity to explore the underlying components, often complex, of any given issue. I have more energy to study, to listen, to dialogue and hence to more comprehensively evaluate the voices that call me to follow.

In times of relative ease - I can weigh up evidence, consider complexity - embrace ambiguity - hold things creatively in tension - and so my views becomes more open, more generous. My capacity to work through issues greater and ultimately my decisions more balanced.

However when our circumstances become stressful and the anxieties of life are many, then we seek to limit tension in our thinking about issues. We have less appetite for information and less desire for extensive dialogue in decisions. We just want solutions. We just want someone to tell us what to do! Its then when the 'Three word slogans' most appeal. When fear and anxiety abound then Strong leaders thrive - and sometimes this is good and sometimes terrible! (i.e. Nazi Germany)

So, 'Following the one who calls' - is a complex issue and it needs some reflection especially if we are concerned for a decent society.

Hold ona decent society? Well, what is a decent society? We might all have some variations on this theme but let me suggest

1. One where individuals and organisations have choice and freedom.
2. One where the choice and freedom of individuals or groups do not diminish the choice and freedom of other individuals or groups.
3. One where order and stability and peace are maintained.
4. One where 'meaning' is a value to be respected and explored.
5. One where relationships can flourish

So - to Follow the one who calls - we need to evaluate 'the one who calls' and the 'direction' they would have us 'follow them in', And to evaluate we need to have some basic criteria on which to make that evaluation. (The 5 things above might be considered a starting point I'd love to hear your views on these 5 and any extras?)

So to Jesus - he does call us to follow - he claims to be the good shepherd (John 10: 14-18) - should we follow? Who is he and where does he lead? Will he take us to a point of human flourishing?

Certainly his claims are impressive (Of course, claims alone are cheap, never the less what are they?.....) Jesus makes many claims - let me look at just a few from the readings today.

1. He is good (John 10:14) and encourages goodness in his followers (1 Peter 2:24)
2. He comes that we might have abundant life (John 10:10)
3. He will unite people. [As one flock (John 10:16) and, because he forgives sins, to God(1 Peter 2:24-25)]

These are enormous claims which we would love to grasp hold of in both uncertain and certain times - but despite the times we need to remind one another that rigour in enquiry should always proceed accepting any claims!

How do we evaluate these claims - what might rigour in enquiry entail? Let me suggest the following -

Does he walk his talk? Does he lead by example?

1. His goodness was noted by friends and enemies. (1 Peter 2:21-23)
2. His leadership is no ivory tower - he suffers for his people. Hence he leads by example (John 10:15, 1 Peter 2:21)
3. He achieves - He dies - yet lives. His healing and peace palpable.

What sort of gatherings rise up from his followers? Are they appealing?

When we look at Acts 2:43ff we see a sharing 'group' where everyone would have enough, even if it required a costly sacrifice. We see both a joyful gathering and also a gathering that enjoyed the goodwill of the wider community. And on reading 1 Peter 2:13-21, we see followers who value the delicate balance of faithfulness to Jesus (even if it leads to suffering) and also living well with the wider community. The picture is of followers who engage and embed themselves in the wider community for its flourishing irrespective of their own flourishing.

How do these gatherings maintain their character so they might continue true to Jesus?

In Acts 2:42-43, we see a community that devotes themselves to the teaching of the apostles (Hence, a teaching focused on Jesus - from his baptism to his ascension -Acts 1:21-22) and, importantly, to fellowship. Yes, there is a submitting to a teaching but it is submitting in fellowship. Importantly this fellowship comprised of a certain group interpretation, a testing (see 1 Corinthians 14:27-33). The gathering is submitting to a teaching that also has the enacted drama of a meal, a feeling and tasting. This recalls the love of Jesus as he lay down his life for us, and reinforces that our belonging is not just in a words but in a being.

I could say more, but I hope the above gives some confidence to follow the Jesus who calls! In the uncertainty of our days - let us recommit ourselves to following Jesus - not as a glib formula - but a living complex balance of belonging to one another and to the community in which we live. A following, built on the foundation of Jesus as expressed in the apostle's teaching (perhaps defined in formations like the Apostles creed, which follows in the service). A following which demands a constant rigour of application in a complex world.

If we maintain this foundation. If we maintain this rigour then not only will we diligently follow 'the worthy one' who calls but we might also be well placed to model and inspire a rigour of thinking and a breath of generosity to others when the complexities of life threaten to shrink our capacity for careful thinking in 'the all' of our complex/global lives.

Songs in the Service

Something Beautiful by Steve Apirana

*Something beautiful, Something good, All my confusion
He understood. And all I had to offer him was broken and strife
He made something Beautiful out of my life* Repeat *-*

He gave me beauty for ashes, the oil of joy. Instead of sadness, He gave me a garment of praise for the spirit of emptiness, Yeah Repeat *-*

Concluding Song - Anywhere With Jesus by Amy Grant

Anywhere with Jesus I can safely go
Anywhere He leads me in this world below
Anywhere without Him dearest joy would fade
Anywhere with Jesus I am not afraid
* Anywhere, anywhere ...any little fear I'll never know
Anywhere with Jesus I can safely go *
Anywhere with Jesus, I am not alone
Other friends may fail me, He is still my own
Tho' His hand may lead me over dearest ways
Anywhere with Jesus is a house of praise (Repeat *-*)

Anywhere with Jesus I can go to sleep
When the darkening shadows round about me creep
Knowing I shall waken nevermore to roam
Anywhere with Jesus will be home, sweet home
(Repeat *-*)
Anywhere with Jesus I can surely go.