

Follow



the Leader!

So many of the games we played as children were a copy of some aspect of adult life. In a sense they were preparing us for adulthood.

Now what about the game of “Follow the Leader!”? or perhaps you would prefer to remember “O’Grady” or its more politically correct “Simon says”?

Are we leaders... or followers... or a bit of both?

A lot of the time we are followers. The question is, “Whose lead are we following?”



1. Follow Me!

**Readings: Matthew 4.18-22; Luke 9.23-27;
John 21.15-25**

Human beings seem to be programmed to be “followers” – at least, that’s what we end up doing!

William Ernest Henley, in his poem *Invicta*, was proud of his “unconquerable soul”. He boldly declared –

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

Born in 1849, William Henley was the eldest in a family of six children, son of a financially-struggling book-seller. At the age of twelve, he was diagnosed with tubercular arthritis. By the time he was eighteen, his left leg was amputated below the knee – the normal (but often fatal) Victorian cure for the condition. Later he spent some twenty months in hospital under the care of Joseph Lister. These experiences came together to make him disillusioned with life, yet asserting positive faith in himself. He ended his life in suicide.

The master of my fate... the captain of my soul... That’s a rather bold claim. Certainly all of us, Henley included, make choices that determine our direction – here and hereafter. True that we are all responsible, no matter how much our circumstances seem to be determined for us.

A few years ago I was doing some personal research into Communism. I walked into the East-Wind bookshop in Brisbane to purchase a copy of Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto* and Chairman Mao’s little red handbook. The latter was about the colour and size of the New Testament and Psalms that the Gideons give out to year 8 students.

Browsing further, I was surprised to see what can only be described as Communist hymn-books. For all its protestations of atheism, Communism was displaying the marks of a religion. We hear socialist speakers talking about “true believers” too – what do they mean?

Reflect:

- What does it mean for me to follow Jesus?
- How do I begin, and how do I keep on following Jesus?
- Jesus never forgot the “other sheep” who needed to hear his voice. What will this mean for me – and for us – as we follow Jesus?

Reflect:

- In the immediate context, who did Jesus mean by “thieves and robbers” and the “hired hands”?
- Who might be the “thieves” and “hired hands” of today?

Jesus is the Good Shepherd – “I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep” (vv. 14-15).

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price...” (1 Cor. 6.19-20). John wrote that Jesus Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2.2). The benefits of his death are available for every person who will receive them. Nobody need be excluded.

Yet in a special way the words of Jesus in John 10.14 apply to each one of us who is depending on his finished work of salvation. We are **his** sheep – we belong to him. We hear his voice – in the Scriptures and in the prompting of his Spirit within us. Having heard his voice, we follow him – seeking and doing his will at all times, serving him whoever our human boss may be.

But there are other sheep not yet part of the flock. He died for all and his call must go out to all.

The immediate context was undoubtedly the non-Jews – the Gentiles. And that call has included us.

The Shepherd’s heart is still reaching out to each one – to those who once belonged but have become lost (as in Lk. 15), and to those who have never heard. “I must bring them also” (v. 16). But Jesus is no longer physically present. He has committed the task of “calling” to us, his earthly flock. Just as we get all cozy and comfortable, he reminds us that the flock is incomplete.

Of course, Jesus didn’t stay dead. Pilate tried to impress Jesus with his own power of life and death over him (19.10). But Jesus would “lay down his life” and “take it up again” (10.17-18).

He is the Good Shepherd. He offers life to the full. He alone is worthy to be followed.

During the 1920s, the House of Commons in England was debating proposed changes to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. In one of the breaks one member of Parliament was overheard saying to another, “I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Surely all of us believe in some sort of something!”

Reflect:

- It has been said that “mankind is incurably religious”. Do we agree? What evidence do we see that this is so?

Follow Me!**Read: Matthew 4.18-22.**

Let’s think for a moment about what that call must have meant for those four fishermen.

They would have to leave their old life-style and livelihood behind. Not that Peter sold his boat – just yet! Later they went across the Sea of Galilee in what we presume to be Peter’s boat – and there was a great storm (8.23-27). Jesus used it as a platform to preach to the crowd (13.1). After the cross and resurrection, Peter took a number of the other disciples fishing (Jn 21).

In Luke 5, we read of a second “call” to Peter. At that stage, he was still carrying on his fishing business. Jesus taught the people from Peter’s boat and then asked him to “put out into the deep water and let down the nets for a catch” (v. 4). They had just spent a fruitless night fishing, but now, at Jesus’ bidding, a dramatic catch!

“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (v. 9) But this time, humbled at his own game, Peter and his partners “left everything and followed him.” So they could learn to be better fishermen? That’s not it! “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.” They would be learning to be “fishers of men”.

Reflect:

- For three years they “followed Jesus”. During that time what did “following Jesus” mean for them? To what extent do these things also apply to us?

The Cross**Read: Luke 9.23-27; John 21.15-25.**

There was a certain point from which Jesus began to make it clear to them that he would be crucified and die and rise again.

In Matthew 16, Peter had just declared that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God (v. 16). At that time Jesus began to prepare them for the coming events in Jerusalem. But Peter rebuked Jesus, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (v. 22)

For all of them, not just Peter, such events were unthinkable for the Messiah. Unthinkable too for these twelve who, each and every one of them in one way or another, had hopes of being the greatest in the Kingdom (as in 18.1). Even before Pentecost, the hopes of an earthly Kingdom were still in their minds (Acts 1.6) – and their own secure and important places in it?

The whole notion that Jesus, Master and Messiah, would die had a shattering, bewildering effect on them from which they didn’t begin to recover until after the resurrection – the promise they hardly heard.

Whatever could they make of Jesus’ words – “... anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14.27)? They hadn’t seen that in the fine print!

Then, after the resurrection, after the restoration of Peter, the graphic words of prophecy about Peter – “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (Jn 21.18). Yes, Peter would die a martyr’s death. But his calling hadn’t changed – “Follow me!”

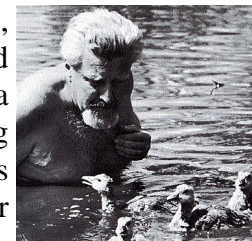
Reflect:

- “Carry your cross and follow me.” What did those words of Jesus mean to the twelve and to his other hearers? What do they mean for us?
- There are places in the world where Christians face beatings, torture, imprisonment and even death for their faith. What priority do we give to “following Jesus”?

to a hundred or so. They were **his** sheep. He knew each one of them and they knew him. They recognised his call. They followed him.

H.N. Morton, in his book *In the Steps of the Master* (1935), writes “Early one morning I saw an extraordinary sight not far from Bethlehem. Two shepherds had evidently spent the night with their flocks in a cave. The sheep were all mixed together and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions. One of the shepherds stood some distance from the sheep and began to call. First one, then another, then four or five animals ran towards him; and so on until he had counted his whole flock.”

Austrian Nobel-Prize-winner, Konrad Lorenz, studied animal behaviour and what is called “imprinting”. If newly-hatched geese are exposed to a moving object of reasonable size and emitting reasonable sounds, they will begin to follow it just as they would normally follow their mother. A similar principle bonds the sheep to the shepherd.



Reflect:

- How does our knowledge of the Eastern shepherd help us understand what Jesus is saying in this passage?

The Gate and the Shepherd

Read: John 10.7-18.

The sheep pen was usually an enclosure of rocks with just one opening. The shepherd himself was the gate to let them in and out, and he slept in the opening to keep them safe.

Jesus himself is the Gate. Through him alone we have access to salvation (14.6), to spiritual nourishment, to true protection – life “to the full” (10.10). The thief, by contrast, isn’t seeking the well-being of the sheep, but his own selfish ends.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The word “good” here means not just “correct” but “beautiful”. Some people are repulsively good – certainly not Jesus. The Good Shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11). In fact he lays down his life so we can have life to the full. By contrast, the “hired hand” abandons the sheep in the face of dangerous predators – no longer protecting the sheep, but seeking only his own safety and security.



3. Good Shepherd

Reading: John 10.1-18.

There's a bright light and an unusual craft descends silently and lands in an open grassy area nearby. A ramp is lowered and a strange creature emerges. Three bright shining eyes. Strange pointed ears. Olive-green skin with a touch of bright pink fur. With a strange waddling gait the creature comes closer. Is it hostile or friendly? At the very least it must have some form of intelligence. To judge by the strange craft in which it has arrived, it may have a very high form of intelligence. Will it communicate or attack? Is it wiser to wait and see or to make a quick escape? Just then, the creature lifts its four-fingered hand. It is about to speak. "Take me to your master!"

Have you ever had that experience? I have met two people who have claimed to have seen an Unidentified Flying Object – a UFO. Science fiction aside, they have experienced something. What has it all been about?

There is a sign that says, "Once I was indecisive, but now I'm not so sure!" And with UFOs, is officialdom "not so sure" or just plain skeptical – assuming people have an over-active imagination, or worse?

Certainly it has become good fodder for science-fiction books and television series and these have enhanced the expectation of such experiences. And then, there have been other books suggesting, not extra-terrestrial causes, but highly secret experiments with new technologies being conducted by American or Russian agencies!

Now wait a minute! We're Australians, mate! We don't have a master around here! ...or do we?

Reflect:

- A lot of the time we are followers. But – whose "lead" are we following? What are the ideas and ideologies that seem to grab our allegiance today? How are they affecting our life-style and society?

Shepherds Good and Bad

Read: John 10.1-6.

Here in Australia we think of sheep in their thousands – and the drover and his sheep-dogs. The Palestinian shepherd might only have a flock of up



2. No Turning Back!

Reading: Luke 9.57-62.

In Luke 17.32 we read the shortest saying of Jesus and the second shortest verse in the Bible, "Remember Lot's wife!"

This saying recalls the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom was where Lot, Abraham's nephew, had chosen to live. But God had declared to Abraham that he would destroy these cities because "their sin is so grievous" (Gen. 18.20). Abraham then prayed that the city be spared "if there are fifty righteous people in the city" (v. 24), or "forty" (v. 29), or "thirty" (v. 30), or "twenty" (v. 31), or "ten" (v. 32). God's promise to him was "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it" (v. 32).

Yet when the angelic messengers went to Lot's house in Sodom, the riotous degraded actions of the men of the city made it quite clear that their heart was turned against the Lord God. There were not even ten!

The city would not be spared the divine judgment! They must escape while they could! So Lot and his wife and two daughters set out for safety. Among the instructions given to them was, "Don't look back!" (19.17). "But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt" (v. 26). The apocryphal book of Wisdom (10.7) makes this comment, "The pillar of salt stands monument to an unbelieving soul."

When Jesus said, "Remember Lot's wife", he was warning against the temptation to turn back to the old life.

Reflect:

- It is sometimes said that "everyone has his price" – that there is a point for each person where they will forego their values and beliefs. Is that true for us? For the present we have freedom to hold Christian beliefs and to express them in a Christian life-style. Where do we feel ourselves to be weakest – most vulnerable to the temptation to "turn back"?

Three Prospective Followers

Read: Luke 9.57-62.

Three men – three backgrounds, three motivations, three agendas – thought it would be good and commendable to follow Jesus.

The first was quite comprehensive in his offer to Jesus – irresistible? “I will follow you wherever you go” (v. 57). Who in their right mind would turn down such an offer? His enthusiasm is commendable, but does he have any understanding of what following Jesus will entail?

Jesus doesn't give him any guarantees of physical and financial security – “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (v. 58).

Reflect:

- Emotions are an important part of our humanness. Emotion comes into our response to Jesus. Think about the time of our commitment to Christ – or when our relationship to Jesus was clarified and confirmed. To what extent did emotion come into it? Why is it important for there to be more than emotion?

Jesus wasn't “fobbing him off”. The man just needed to understand and take account of the cost of discipleship.

Jesus called the second man, “Follow me.” His response indicated unwillingness to put his relationship with Jesus first in his life – “First let me go and bury my father” (v. 59).

The father hadn't died – probably wasn't even seriously ill! In either situation the man wouldn't have been casually walking along the road. It's just that he wanted to have completed all his usual family obligations first. That could go on and on and on. Elsewhere we hear Jesus condemning those who cleverly used their devotion to God as an excuse not to help parents (see Mt 15). The issue here is the imperative call of the Kingdom.

Reflect:

- Paul wrote, “I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6.2). What are some of the areas where we have said to the Lord – yes, even as “followers”! – “Not just yet!”? What reasons did/do we give?

The third wanted to return home and say goodbye to his family (v. 61). That seems quite a reasonable request.

In 1 Kings 19.19-21 we read of the call of Elisha. At the time he was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen. Elijah granted his request to kiss his parents goodbye. What Elisha did next was remarkable. “He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the ploughing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.” That's burning your bridges behind you!

But coming back to our third man in Luke 9... What was the difference between this man's request and Elisha's? Time was certainly one factor. Jesus was on his final trip to Jerusalem – and to crucifixion. The message and the Messiah cannot wait. There can be no divided interests.

The man's family may well not have been supportive of his tentative decision. To return home may have led him away from his resolve to follow Jesus. He may never have returned to Jesus.

Reflect:

- When we came to the decision to “follow Jesus”, did we find ourselves surrounded by a supportive network, or did we believe against a backdrop of active discouragement? What kind of influence did family and friends have on us at the point of our commitment?

What Jesus said to the third man sums up his call to them all – and to us – to a wholehearted commitment. “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (v. 61). Luke doesn't record the final outcome of any of these three encounters.

An unknown Indian prince – quite probably disinherited for converting to Christianity – wrote these words:

I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back.

Though none go with me, still I will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.