

St James, Colwall, 10.1 5am Eucharist, 23rdAugust, 2009.

Joshua 24: 1 - 2a, 14 - 18; Ephesians 6:10 - 20; John 6: 56 - 69; Commitment

I think that's an extraordinary incident. Disciples who had actually heard Jesus teaching – who had actually witnessed him performing amazing miracles – healing – casting out evil spirits - could not only doubt him, but reject him. They 'drew back and no longer went about with him'. They saw, but did not believe. At least not with sufficient conviction or passion to commit themselves to Jesus any longer.

There's a similarity with another incident. You've heard of Charles Blondin, one of the world's greatest tightrope walkers. About 150 years ago, before an enormous crowd, Blondin attempted to walk a tightrope stretched 1000 metres across the Niagara Falls and 160 metres above the Falls. And amazingly, he did it!

Then he asked the crowd if they believed he could wheel a person back in a wheelbarrow. They all shouted 'Yes!' because they had just seen that he was the greatest tightrope walker in the world. So he then asked for a volunteer — but no one spoke up! No one was prepared to trust Blondin and put what they believed into practice.

But eventually one person did agree to go. Henry Colcord, Blondin's manager. He alone had real confidence and trust in Blondin's skill as a tightrope walker.

The crowd all said they believed in the abilities of Blondin, but when they were challenged to do something about it no one moved. They weren't prepared to put their belief into action!

So it can be with belief in Jesus. Why did many of his disciples turn back and no longer follow him? Well, perhaps it was like this. Although they had seen Jesus in action, it was vital that they didn't just listen to him — they needed to do what he asked them to do. This would inevitably involve self-sacrifice and hardship. Jesus never said there was anything glamorous about the path he asked his followers to tread; it was tough and treacherous, but it was one Jesus was willing to take (and lead his followers on).

We could ask again, but for ourselves, - why do many Christians turn back and no longer follow Jesus? Following Jesus is difficult. It means making a fundamental decision with your life — to commit to Jesus or not. It has been said that, 'When presented with a range of choices, the hardest one is often the right one to opt for'. Perhaps we paraphrase St Augustin's plea about chastity — Lord, make me commit totally to you, but not just yet. (I sometimes think that is why it took me 25 years after I first felt called, to get to the point of Ordination).

Let's think for a moment about Joshua and the Israelites. He asks them to make a choice. After many years of journeying and setbacks, Canaan is theirs, divided up between the various tribes of Israel. At long last, they are at peace with their neighbours. Joshua is old and close to death. He calls the people together for a communal act of commitment to God.

On their travels, their commitment to the Lord had sometimes wavered. Some of them were worshiping the pagan gods that their forefathers had worshiped in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Hence, Joshua is appealing to them to recommit their lives to the Lord.

They are free to choose for themselves whom they will serve. But Joshua makes his commitment to the Lord public. He hoped to encourage them to make the same response. In the end they decide to make a firm commitment as a people - to trust, serve and worship the Lord God who had delivered them from Egypt. Who had led them through the wilderness into this 'Promised Land'. The covenant they will make is a solemn agreement between Joshua and the Israelites on one side, and God on the other.

If I wanted to be cynical, or at best flippant, I might say that nowadays, the strongest commitment of any group of disciples to trust, serve and worship is that of supporters of Premier League football, rather than disciples of Jesus.

I heard someone saying recently that the similarity between religion and football is obvious — the songs of praise on the terraces, the waving of banners, the wearing of cultic robes, the total commitment of true devotees.

For example, many football fans make enormous sacrifices of time and money to follow their team. Apparently, there are many families where over a third of the household income goes on football - tickets, travel, replica kits and so on. Money - and time: almost all of the hours not spent earning this money are devoted to football - TV replays, endless analysis and discussion of games and so on. This is an all-consuming passion. Many a Rector can only dream of such commitment! Perhaps religion and especially the Christian Church can learn from it.

There is an even more telling lesson to be learnt here - the danger of a commitment to an almost exclusively spectator sport. The million or so people who watch football simply do that - watch it. And it has to be said that most of the 70% of the population of the UK who described themselves in the last census as 'Christian' are mirroring the football fans. True faith isn't a spectator sport. We mustn't just sit there, we've got to plunge into the action.

Maybe getting involved in the action is too daunting for some. But I think that is more to do with self-preservation and pride than the size of the challenge and the worldly barriers which have to be overcome. For there's no need for drawing back or hesitation. Jesus never asks his disciples to walk the road alone. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus said that his Spirit would enable his disciples to have the strength to follow him. And like those first disciples, the Holy Spirit is still available to 'take my band, and let me stand, where no one stands alone' (that comes from a gospel sung by Elvis Presley).

And there is more to the strength provided by God to those who make their commitment to him.. As a prisoner awaiting Roman justice, it should come as no surprise that Paul used the very armour worn by his prison guards to describe God's strength - truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation. And to what end do we need the armour of God?

The function of the Roman soldier's armour was defensive. It was designed to keep the soldier from dying so that he could go on fighting for the Empire.

The function of the Christian's "armour" is to keep us going - to strengthen our commitment - but above all, to keep the faithful alive - alive in Christ - to help defend us "against the wiles of the devil". And believe me, we need to make use of each piece of armour — to make them integral parts of ourselves — truth, righteousness, peace, faith and a sense of the reality of the salvation Christ has won for us.

To use them constantly against the very real power of evil. This power is not only alive in the world at large. It can be alive in us if we do not fight it with all the defences of goodness and wisdom at our disposal. There is much to tempt us into sin, be it money, power, drugs, apathy or whatever the devil can encourage **you** to drift into — your weaknesses, vulnerabilities — the chinks in your armour! Cover them up in God's strength.

As we heard, Peter, the oft-tempted disciple, the one who failed so often when put to the test, chose to stay with Jesus. We are little different to Peter in all the times we fail our Lord. So if Peter chose to carry on with great effect, so can we. And so we should. Despite all the certain difficulties he would face, Peter believed that Jesus had "the words of eternal life" and he knew that Jesus was the "Holy One of God". In many respects, Peter's answer involved a spiritual no-contest choice. A real follower of Jesus could not say 'No, Lord!' The response must always be 'Yes, Lord.'. There is never any drawing back, or turning away. That has to be the extent of our commitment.

Amen.