

Mark 9:38-50

WAY TO GO

Something which God's people have always struggled with, is how to live out our lives as God's people in this world. How to follow Him, and share His love in our everyday lives. The same kind of struggle to live out the earthly life of our beliefs can possibly be said about all or most belief systems. We have many examples in the Bible of this, don't we? The first sin was Adam and Eve being given one rule by God, to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and then promptly breaking that rule. From that point on we have examples of people who followed God in so many ways, but still had their own failings as they did this. Moses was the great leader who led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but his anger saw him kill a man and also affected his relationship with God. King David was a great warrior and as a man of God wrote many of the beautiful Psalms we love, but his weakness in his relationships meant his family life was rubbish. King Solomon started out as a humble king to whom God gave great wisdom, but he developed a desire for power and influence which saw him marry many women from outside of his nation and religion, something God had warned against. And the Bible is full of stories like that; stories of the up and down struggle people have in living out their faith in this world.

We know that we face this too, don't we? How do I live out God's love in my life? How do I apply God's teachings to my life today? What is the way for me to go in my life? As Christians, a word we might use to describe this is 'discipleship'. It's a word that has so many meanings and connotations that I don't like to give it a short standard definition, but one way we could talk about it is: what does it mean, what does it look like, to live as God's people in this world, today?

The struggle, the tension, to live out our faith in the world and life we are in. When I think about this, I often think about Biblical story of Queen Esther. It's a great story in the Bible, only ten chapters long, and if you haven't read it before I encourage you to have a look at it (and/or watch the great 2006 film made on the story). Esther is one of a large group of Jews living in exile in Persia. At this time the Jews aren't outwardly persecuted, but it's easier for many of them, like Esther and her family, to downplay their identity as God's people. The Queen of Persia loses her throne because she dares to defy the King, and after what is essentially a nationwide yearlong beauty pageant, Esther becomes the new Queen. Esther's uncle, Mordechai, who raised

her, is one of the king's officials, and he discovers a plot by other officials to trick the King into passing a law which would see all Jews persecuted. Mordechai goes to Esther, urging her to speak to the King on behalf of her people. Esther says that she can't do that; to approach the King without being called would mean that at best she could lose her throne, and at worst she could be killed. Then Mordechai says to his niece; 'it could be that you were made Queen for a time like this'. (Esther 4:14)

What words for us to have before us as we go through this life as followers of God; 'it could be that you were for a time like this. What does it mean if we apply that to what we face, the decisions we make in our lives? (by the way, Esther did speak up to the King, her people were saved, and she and Mordechai were rewarded).

Discipleship. Living out our faith in this world and life. The way to go. Those are also themes which come out in our Gospel reading for today from Mark 9:38-50. The reading begins with the disciple John saying that a 'non-follower' was driving out demons in Jesus' name, so he told the man to stop. Expecting praise from Jesus, John was instead told, 'Don't stop him! No one who works miracles in my name will soon turn and say something bad about me'. (39) Jesus then goes on to warn the disciples about causing others to sin. And the third teaching here, which sounds drastic when taken literally, is about removing ourselves from anything which will tempt or cause us to sin against God. These three points from Jesus are a part of what it means to live a life of discipleship, to go God's way, to live out our faith in our lives. Let's have a look at each of them and think about what they are saying to us.

'John said, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to force demons out of people. But he wasn't one of us, and we told him to stop.'" (38) What do you see or hear in those opening words of John? We can take them as words of judgement, can't we? 'Jesus, this guy is not one of us! How dare He do the things which we, your faithful followers, have been empowered to do!' John, and probably many if not all the other disciples, had made following Jesus a bit of an exclusive club.

How do we apply this, and Jesus' response, to ourselves here and now? In what ways might we exclude others, hopefully not outright and out loud, but in our attitude, and even subtly in our words and actions? Whether it is visitors to our Christian community, those who come along occasionally, or those we see regularly but maybe don't get along with or completely agree with, is there a challenge for us in this teaching

of Jesus about how we live out our faith in relation to them? Thinking of Mordechai's words to his niece Queen Esther, can we ever think, 'it could be that you are a part of this Church family to support/encourage/witness to/ walk beside that person at a time like this'? One of the areas in which we are called to live out our faith is in our relationships with our fellow followers.

And then, there's the warning about causing others to sin. Again, looking at ourselves, in what areas of our lives can we apply this warning? Is it about negativity towards our Church family or the wider Church which might affect or undermine the relationship of others with their fellow Christians? Do we show stubbornness, or anger, or a lack of forgiveness, which affects not only our relationship with a group or person, but also the relationship of others? Instead of doing or saying things which lead people towards a life of living out their faith, do instead our words and actions lead them away from Him? If you look at examples from the Bible you'll see that this struggle to speak and conduct ourselves in a way that leads people towards God, not away from Him, has always been there. It's something we regularly need to honestly look at, ask God's forgiveness for, and pray for His help to go the right way in this.

The third one then; to remove from ourselves anything which causes us personally to sin. Jesus' teaching is very upfront in telling us to cut off body parts. I don't think this is meant to be taken literally, even though I have heard of people doing that. What we are being called to do here is to remove from ourselves anything which will tempt us to go against God's way for us. One example I can give is that over the years there have been a couple of shows we have stopped watching on TV because we feel that a practice they portray as being ok goes against what we believe, and we feel uncomfortable that we feel our values are being subtly worked on. For example, they might be making recreational drug use look like an ok and harmless thing to do. So, as much as we might like the show as a whole, and want to see how it finishes up, we stop watching it. That's a judgement to be made by each person. Someone else might watch the same thing and say, 'that's ok, I can watch that and not be influenced by it, in fact, I can learn more about the attitude of others from it'. While others think, 'I feel uncomfortable with that and where I feel it is leading me, so I need to remove myself from it'.

Are there things you do, or watch, or listen to, or read, which can be like that for you? Again, it's a judgement each one of us makes for ourselves. What we are called to do here is to be open and honest about

it, and to make even a hard decision if needed about those things, or events, or people, who get between us and our relationship with God. And it might not mean a complete removal or cutting off, but a change in how we approach some of these things, what we do with them, the place we give them in our lives. The way to go in living as a disciple of Jesus does sometimes involve making those kinds of decisions, as does really all relationships in our lives. Bring to God the struggles you have with this, and ask for His help with it.

As we look at a reading like this, taking it by itself and out of the overall context, we can easily think, ‘wow, I have no hope!’ But we have to put it into the whole message and story of God’s relationship with His people. The starting point for us in this call to discipleship, is God’s love for us, and how He has shown this love in Jesus. We are God’s people, His disciples, because in our Baptism He made us His children and gave us the promise He will never leave us. The reason we have teachings like this and others in the Bible isn’t so that we can earn or be worthy of God’s love, but because God wants us to be able to both live in and live out His love in our lives now. He wants us to always know Him and what He wants to give us, and to help others to know Him too.

‘It could be that you were..... for a time like this’. Is there anything you could put in there right now? If you can, take those words from Uncle Mordechai with you this week as you face various situations and go through different relationships; see what applying them to different situations and relationships calls you to do. It is a challenge, and always will be, to live out our faith in our lives. As God’s people, as Jesus’ disciples, that is what we are called to do. But always remember, we walk this path in God’s love, with the cross of Jesus both before us and with us, following the way to go which gives us new life both now and forever. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- ‘It could be that you were ... for a time like this’. Are there any situations or relationships in your life in which you feel God has placed you there for a purpose? How are you being called to live this out?
- Think about what we have looked at here in relation to discipleship: being inclusive in God’s family, not causing others to sin, moving away from anything which causes us to go away from God. Are you challenged as a disciple to change attitudes, words, or actions in any of these areas? If you find this difficult to do, hand it over to God and ask for both His forgiveness and assistance.
- Reflect on what it means to live a life of discipleship, to go God’s way, and share His love in your life. Remember God’s love as you do this, and ask for His help, and strength, to be a faithful disciple for Him.

Prayer: thank God that in His love He calls each of us to be one of His people. Ask for His help, and His forgiveness as we strive to live our faith out in our lives each day.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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