



## Sermon on 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 2021 | Reverend Canon Stan Evans

### **‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’**

One of the first lessons of ordination is that you lose the right to your own persona. As soon as you become a “public person”, the people will form their own image of you, whether you like it or not. Key to this process will be the many images presented in the newsletters or on Facebook, Website and the wider press. Then there's the image you present to your people – hopefully truthful, but with the awareness that you don't want them to be put off and desert you; and then there's the face you show your family and close friends, which is closer to the “real” you – just as you are.

Our passage shows the differing and changeable perceptions of Jesus among his followers and the crowds. We want him to be the image of what we hope he represents. If he is truly from God then we assume he will behave in the way we expect God to behave. In this way we treat Jesus as we do all our celebrities or public figures, whether they represent our dreams, our morals or our country. And it can be problematic when they step out of line or behave seemingly “out of character”.



Yet as Jesus' teaching continues, it becomes clear that the fulfilment of God's purpose does not depend on how it is received, but rather on the faithfulness of the servant.

Why did people believe Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah?  
It's because people love to believe a myth.

We love the idea of the wonder-drug, of mind over matter, of this or that conspiracy theory. For some reason, the people didn't generally believe Jesus was the Messiah, but they did think he was from God – some kind of reincarnation, some "ghost of Christmas past" come to haunt them for perhaps suppressing the truth, or simply for the way God's prophet was treated.

Even Peter, who gets the answer right, has it all so wrong. "You are the Messiah!" he says – with hardly a clue as to what Messiah really means. In Matthew 16, Jesus then goes on to bless Peter for his declaration, but here in Mark we simply have the stern order not to tell anyone about him.

Peter proves his lack of understanding in the following exchange. Just as the people wanted Jesus to be their kind of myth, so Peter wished him to be his kind of Messiah. Jesus' teaching here is often called his first "passion prediction", but he doesn't only speak of suffering. He also foretells resurrection.



This point is completely lost on Peter, who takes Jesus aside to give him some coaching in positive thinking. He is fixated on his image of how the Messiah will save. He cannot think outside the box. For Peter, it is impossible that the Messiah could be rejected and suffer like that! He isn't ready to have his faith stretched.

Jesus' famous response, "Get behind me, Satan!" shows that Peter's mindset is blocking his way. Knowing Jesus is Messiah is just a fraction of the matter, which Peter overlays with a huge mound of human assumptions. "You are setting your mind," says Jesus, "not on divine things, but on human things."

In the teaching that follows, Jesus talks about giving up everything to be his follower – and the disciples have already, seemingly, done this. But perhaps the key thing for them to give up is their preconceived mindset.

In Jesus, God was revealing a mystery – hitherto unseen. It is how we think of things that causes us to hold on to them tightly – but if our arms are full of the wrong things, then we are unable to take hold of life.



Finally, Jesus shows that he is the revealer.

The way to follow him is to have our minds open to how and what he reveals about God. Ultimately our destiny of life or death depends on what we think of him.

But.....What if we struggle? We, you and I, are maybe not ready to abandon everything and go into 'free-fall' – and deny ourselves – but still want to be a good Christian – we are not all perfect followers. We tend to stray and sometimes we tend to think we want to go our own way – for we know better.

Like Peter, we are susceptible to making God the way we want him, or think he ought to be. But God is always surprising because our minds are too small and our wisdom too earthbound. A large part of faithfulness for Christian disciples, therefore, is not simply sticking with the small extent to which our eyes have already been opened, but displaying the courage to have our faith extended by new insights into God's grace.

So do not let us hold back, but recklessly abandon everything to Jesus, and I mean everything that weighs you down upon him.

You do not know when God's voice will come.

But whenever the realisation that when his call comes, even in the very faintest way imaginable, recklessly abandon

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everything for Him; it is only by this abandonment that you will recognise him.

Sometimes, like baby eaglets, we need to be nudged off the ledge to go into free-fall. It is by falling like the eaglets that we totally have to trust in our loving heavenly father who – like the male eagle, swoops beneath and gently brings us to a safe landing.....

At your baptism you became a child of God, called to be a spiritual temple with Jesus as our corner stone.

Let us walk with Him – abandoning everything to him, asking no questions, giving our Lord credit for knowing the way he is leading us.

So dear friends – ‘deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow Him’ – for there is no greater privilege – and ultimately no greater joy.

**Amen**