

## **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> January 2026 – ‘Practising the Way’ – INTRO (Mark 1:14-20, John 15:9-17)**

Our world is full of religious language. Companies have mission statements. Social media personalities have followers. Bank loans have grace periods, dietary plans have fasting days, when we admit to something we may well have a confession to make, and when we agree with something, we may well say: Amen to that!

It can work in reverse, of course. I overheard a conversation just before Christmas between two people who'd attended a Christmas event where children had been singing. The first noted that the event didn't have any carols. 'Oh yes, it did,' said the second, 'the kids sang lots of carols, like "When Santa got stuck up the chimney."' Ho hum.

One word which we use a lot in Christian circles, but which hasn't penetrated our modern culture in the way that 'follower' has, is the word disciple. In many ways, it's a very old-fashioned word, isn't it? When we hear the word disciple we instinctively think of the original disciples: we think of tunics and sandals and long greasy hair; we probably also think of beards because it's a very male word, isn't it? Jesus' female friends are usually given a different name, even though the word is gender-neutral and the 12 we usually think of are more correctly designated as apostles.

It's a shame, because **the word disciple is fundamental to our faith. If we want to call ourselves Christians, then we are disciples.** In fact, you could go further. John Mark Comer begins his book 'Practicing the Way', which will guide us through this term, as follows: 'Who are you following? Everybody is following *somebody* – or at least something. Put another way, we are all disciples. The question isn't, Am I a disciple? It's *who* or *what* am I a disciple of?'

It's a shame, then, that the word disciple doesn't really connect with people – if it's the basic way we understand ourselves, then it ought to be a word that we're comfortable with, a word we really know inside out. So, let's ask a basic question: what is a disciple?

The word really means apprentice. And that's a word we do still use a lot in our culture. We have apprenticeships nowadays, not discipleships – although it's the same word. **So, here's a basic way to understand your faith: you are an apprentice of Jesus.** Only this apprenticeship doesn't just stop after 2 or 3 years, it's lifelong. We are always following, and learning from, the Master.

There's an old Jewish saying from the time of Jesus: may you be covered in the dust of the rabbi. Rabbis were the masters and their disciples (apprentices) used to walk behind them learning what they did. So, this saying really meant: may you be following your master so closely you get covered in the dust their sandals kicked up.

*Isn't that still our goal, too? To be covered in the dust of the greatest rabbi of all: Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God.*

But what does that mean in practice? Let's go back to the beginning, which as someone once said, is a very good place to start – let's go back to Mark, chapter 1 when Jesus begins his ministry and calls his first apprentices. What does he actually say? Mark records two things: 'The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.' And then, directly to the fisherman: 'Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.' What clues have we got here?

**Let's firstly observe that what Jesus is offering is good news.** And although we're going to look at lots of things over the next 3 months, let's not forget as we start this year that what Jesus offers

is good news! There is a lot of bad news around, and that isn't likely to change this year. But we know where there's some good news, don't we?

**The first hearers certainly thought it was good news – they dropped everything to follow Jesus.** And if that sounds unlikely, let's also remember that the sort of offer Jesus was making was usually not for the likes of these fishermen. Only the best of the best got to be disciples of rabbis – this lot had probably stopped their formal education barely past primary age, starting to help with the family fishing business around the time of their Bar-mitzvah aged 13. This was an out-of-this-world offer, like being given a free place at Oxbridge, only you also got to live with your tutor and not just get 2 hours a week of tutorial. *Of course* they left their boats!

Left their boats... to do what? **Firstly, to be with Jesus. 'Come follow me.'** To follow Jesus first and foremost means to *be* with him. Mark makes that clear a couple of chapters later, when Jesus appoints them formally: 'that they might be with him' is the first definition of a special disciple (3:14).

This is just as true today. If we want to be Jesus' apprentices, it starts with being with Jesus. Not just an hour a week at church: 24/7. This is possible because Jesus promises to be with us, by his Spirit. The abiding presence of Christ in our hearts means we can be with Jesus all the time, just like the first apprentices. But we do need to cultivate that capacity to be with Jesus. That means developing practices which enable us to really hear Jesus' voice, to sense his direction, to know his peace, and so on. We can't get much further in the spiritual life if we don't base everything else on this fundamental part of our apprenticeship. We need to be with Jesus.

John puts it beautifully simply in our other reading: we are Jesus' friends. In fact, Jesus calls us friends. What an amazing thought – Jesus calls you his friend. Not a project, or even just a worker on his behalf, but a friend. One church leader put it like this: he wanted to get a T-shirt which said 'Jesus loves you' on the front; and on the back it said – '...but I'm his favourite'. Just like John describes himself – *you* are the disciple Jesus loves. You are his friend.

**Second, we become like Jesus.** Too often we create this remote Jesus, who saves us from our sins but isn't someone we actually try to emulate in any meaningful way. But that isn't how Jesus saw it. 'Repent and believe' he called to any who would be his apprentices. To *repent* means to change your life. If we want to be Jesus' apprentices, our lives will change – and the way that Jesus wants that to happen is that we become more like him.

This isn't about rules – and I can't stress this enough. This is where the church goes wrong. We try to turn becoming like Jesus into rules – do this, don't do that, make sure people can see that you're doing it, too, so we know you're one of us. Jesus got into heated debates with people who thought like that at the time, the leaders of their day. Jesus' approach was entirely different. For Jesus, it was about becoming the sort of person who naturally lived the right way. It was about the heart. The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. Cultivate peace, joy, gentleness, kindness, and so on, and you'll do the right thing most of the time. Or, as John describes how Jesus put it the night before he died: 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Become like me, Jesus says, in your capacity to love. And this isn't touchy feely love or romantic love, or even a liking kind of love – this is selfless love, humble self-giving service.

And again, we can only cultivate this kind of change by co-operating with the Spirit of Jesus in our lives. We need to work, yes, this change is slow and hard – but it's possible if we allow Jesus' Spirit to fill us with the light of his presence and the warmth of his love. Then we can pass it on.

So we are to be with Jesus, become like Jesus – and finally, **we are to do as he did: ‘I will make you fish for people.’** Interestingly, Jesus earths his invitation in language they can understand, using the sort of skills they already had: patience, tenacity, courage. But the bottom line is: Jesus’ invitation was to train them up, so they could do what he did. And that is how we understand apprenticeship today, isn’t it? The point of the apprentice is to be able to do what the boss does. It’s not head knowledge, or simply observing – the end goal is to do the same things.

And this is the key element in Christian apprenticeship as well. Jesus says in the passage in John: ‘keep my commands’ - i.e. do what I do. You can see a consistency across both passages here as to what apprenticeship is: be with me, become like me, do what I do. It’s good sense – just like any good boss, Jesus needs apprentices to continue the work; the kingdom can’t grow without it.

So, this term, we’ll be looking in detail at what it means to be apprentices to Jesus. To be with him, to become like him, to do what he did. Our guide will be a great new book written by John Mark Comer called ‘Practicing the Way’, and this is very apt title, isn’t it. This term we’ll be asking those nitty gritty questions: what does it actually *mean* to practice the way of Jesus, to be his apprentices day-to-day?

**The book looks at 9 practices, which each address these core aims:** we learn to be with Jesus through practising **sabbath, solitude and prayer**. We become like Jesus through engagement with **fasting, scripture and community** (and let’s note the implicit challenge here that scripture and community are more about becoming like Jesus than being with him). We learn to do what Jesus did through **generosity, service and witness** (and again, there’s an implicit challenge that we practise generosity not just to keep our church going but because generosity lies at the absolute heart of what a Christ-directed life looks like).

It’s going to be a really exciting term – not easy, I’m conscious we’re raising the bar a bit. But I might as well be honest: coming to Jesus is easy, following Jesus is hard. It’s the best and most amazing thing you’ll ever do, but also the hardest. We all need training, we need apprenticeship – and the material we’re looking at this term will help us to do that – to grow our spiritual muscles, to enlarge our prayerful lung capacity, to invest our time more wisely. We’re so thrilled to see our church growing, and I know many of us want to keep growing in our faith.

So we’ll be on this journey together. At the beginning of February we’ll also be beginning our Lent groups 3 weeks early so that we can share a course together based on this book. I want as many of us as possible to join in with these groups, we’ll try and offer practical ways to enable that to happen. I’ll also get hold of copies of the book and the course, with low-cost options available, too. For those of you considering baptism and confirmation, this will also function as your preparation for that – and what better way to do that, than by actually spending a term practising the way, learning what it means to be Jesus’ apprentice. Then you’ll know what you’re committing to, and I’m planning to invite Bishop Dave, who’s coming next week to encourage us, to be back after Easter for a special baptism and confirmation service just for us.

As we begin this year, there’s so much to look forward to – and I hope you’ll join me on this journey – it’s one I want us to do together. [FLIER]

And may God grant us all grace to be covered in the dust of our rabbi, Jesus Christ. Amen.