

Year A, Pentecost 14. 30th August 2026

Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

Do you keep a diary, or a journal? Even if you don't maybe you can think of someone in history who did.

Samuel Pepys for example, writing in the seventeenth century. Or Captain Scott who wrote a journal of his ill-fated final expedition to Antarctica. When these two wrote they did it largely day by day as they went along.

But even before this, published in the thirteen century, is Marco Polo's 'The Travels of Marco Polo'. This was a different type of journal in the sense that it was written by someone else from recollections that Marco Polo gave.

All these journals give insights into a journey: Pepys's daily journey through life and Scott's actual physical journey. Marco Polo's journal does the same, but slightly differently in snapshots, but still highlighting both the highs and the lows, the good times and the really hard, difficult times. And, week by week we read this sort of journal together, in the bible.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today give us snapshots of moments in the life-journeys of Jeremiah, Peter and Jesus. Difficult moments all of them.

I have here a snapshot journal of my mother-in-law's life. But it is not really accurate. It fails to record any of the low points. And now I'm wondering what a word-picture snapshot journal of your life's journey so far would look like. Turn to your neighbour and share, as you feel able, what the main snapshots would be, both highs and lows.

What I want to focus on this morning is the particular journey that Jesus calls us to make in our gospel reading: *Follow me*. It's an essential part of being a Christian. First we believe, then we follow. Maybe it features in your journal.

But what does that mean, to follow Jesus? Turn to your neighbour again for a moment and discuss what you think following Jesus means.

In order to follow Jesus we have to see where he is heading. For Jesus, here in Matthew's gospel, the direction is going to be hard, very hard. And when Jesus talks of self-denial he knows what he is talking about and that taking up one's cross is not optional, for us anymore than for him.

I suspect that Jesus has in mind his forthcoming crucifixion - indeed the text suggests it - knowing that the condemned prisoner will be required to carry his own cross to the place of execution, a hard and gruelling journey, both physically and emotionally. Jesus recognises that denying ourselves and taking up our cross will be hard. But he still asks us to do it in order to follow him.

Which means that sometimes we don't; we don't pick up our cross. Or maybe we don't even think about it. We continue to tread the old familiar paths, the habits of years of being a Christian, without knowing whether we are actually following or not.

Of course, we may feel that we already have a cross to bear, a sick or demanding relative, an angry, argumentative neighbour, an overbearing boss or an ongoing health problem. Involuntary crosses in a way.

And bearing such a cross may well involve denying ourselves, but not necessarily following Jesus in the sense of seeing where he is and going the way he is going.

The key, I think, is to focus on following Jesus not on our cross.

At its most basic to follow Jesus is to love God, love one another and love our neighbour. It means being sensitive to Holy Spirit to see what God our Father and God the Son are doing and, in the words of Rowan Williams, joining in. John wrote in his gospel (5:19-20a)

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."²⁰ The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing."

Following Jesus means staying in such close contact and communication with him that we see where he is going and hear as he calls us to go there too. It is so much more than asking ourselves "What would Jesus do?"

The main purpose of Jesus's time on earth was not to give good moral teaching or demonstrate a perfect quality of life. It was to teach and demonstrate that the kingdom of God is at hand, then to die to defeat evil and rise again to usher in God's kingdom.

So following Jesus will involve furthering God's kingdom in this world, being ambassadors for it, demonstrating its presence. How might that work out?

I guess none of us is being led into going to Iran to spread the Gospel, or Sudan to be peacemakers, which would need obvious self-denial. But what of our ordinary daily lives? How might they be impacted?

Let's use a phrase in the Epistle as a basis for thought

- *Bless those who persecute you.*

Consider what Holy Spirit might whisper into your heart as regards blessing your persecutor. Might it involve self-denial?

Turn to your neighbour again – or maybe this time someone in the pew behind you or in front of you – and discuss.

Thoughts I had are of physically helping with gardening or housework, taking a gift – a cake, bottle of wine or theatre tickets maybe – inviting them in for a drink or a meal. And of course, praying for them often. What might Holy Spirit be saying?

But what if taking up our cross means more than this? What if our cross isn't just the burden of the responsibility of expressing the kingdom of God or sharing that the kingdom is at hand?

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve chose to eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that they could be masters of their own lives and destinies. It didn't work out of course. In the words of Jesus, they forfeited their lives.

In the same way we may construct a cross out of our own knowledge of good and evil, right behaviour and wrong, a way of life that we believe will make us acceptable to God. Rules we choose that will make us worthy of God's kingdom. What if this is the cross Jesus is meaning?

What if Jesus is saying; 'Take up that cross, pluck it out from where it is planted and bring it to me? Deny yourself the luxury of determining your own way of godliness.

It's too heavy a burden for you to bear. Exchange your cross for mine':

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

The cross of Jesus, his death and resurrection, is the means whereby we become acceptable to God, not our own cross. We deny our own righteousness in order to partake of Jesus's perfect righteousness.

There is a thread that runs all the way through "Come to me, follow me, hold on tightly to me." I want to read you a short poem by William Stafford that was read to us last Sunday at the Provincial Lay Reader's Conference.

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.

You have to explain about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can't get lost.

Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread.

William Stafford

Don't ever let go of the thread that is Jesus. Follow him through the joys and hardships of life, come what may. And share what the thread is whenever you get the opportunity.

And I hope that when you put together the remainder of your snapshot journal of your life from this point forward sharing the highs, and yes, the lows too, throughout it all will run the thread "I abandoned my way and followed Jesus."
Amen

Chris

Shaw

30 August 2026