

In what ancient city were the followers of Jesus first called Christians? Acts 11:26 tells us that the disciples were called Christians for the first time in the city of Antioch. Now let me ask you another question closely related to that one. What were the followers of Jesus called before they were called Christians? In Acts 9:2 we learn that believers were called members of “the Way.” There are four additional references in the book of Acts where Christians were referred to as followers of “the Way.” Now let me ask you one more question. Then I promise to get on with this sermon. Why do you think believers were called followers of “the Way”? That name can be traced back to Jesus, right? What did he say about himself? He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Yes, Jesus is the only way to God and so his first followers happily connected with the concept that they were followers of “the Way.”

And I think you would agree that we can find a double meaning when we say that Christians are followers of the Way? Not only is Jesus the Way to God and the only Way of being saved from sin, he also shows his followers the way to live. In fact, compared to the way we would live without Jesus in our lives we could say that he shows believers a whole new way of thinking, speaking, and acting. Through God’s Word Jesus shows us the way to walk through life and the way to safely reach the eternal home he has prepared for those who have faith in him.

In the Gospel for this Sunday we just heard Jesus describe his journey to the cross to suffer the punishment we deserved for disobeying God. And then we heard Jesus describe the journey that we as his followers make throughout our lives. Let’s focus our thoughts primarily on the last two verses of our Gospel Lesson. There we have a clear description what it means to journey with Jesus.

When we open to a portion of God’s word and we read, “He then began to teach them…” our first reaction is to go back a few verses and see what happened before Jesus began to teach his disciples. We just heard what happened. While Jesus was walking with his disciples he asked them, “Who do people say I am.” You may recall the answers that the disciples shared. They knew what the “word on the street” was about Jesus. “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Jesus then focused their thoughts by asking, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Peter then gave his all-star answer. He said, “You are the Messiah.” What a great moment that was. The disciples were finally grasping who Jesus was. He was the anointed one—the Messiah—the Christ. He was the Promised Savior anointed with the Holy Spirit and power to serve as Prophet, Priest, and King for God’s people. But Peter and the other disciples didn’t fully know what that meant.

Our gospel tells us that Jesus gave them a basic lesson in the mission of the Messiah. It certainly wasn’t what they expected! “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” The thought of Jesus suffering and dying in such a horrible way didn’t sit well with Peter. You heard Peter’s reaction. Peter took Jesus aside and attempted to set him straight! Imagine that for a moment. Peter was telling Jesus that he was wrong about what it meant to be the Messiah. It sounds ridiculous but that’s what we sinners so often do with God. We want to tell him that he is wrong and that he should be doing things our way. Peter was in for a big surprise. As is anyone who tries to correct God!

Mark’s Gospel continues, “But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Ouch! Although Peter knew Jesus was the Christ clearly he didn’t have a clue about what that meant. And if he didn’t understand Jesus’ journey to the cross he certainly wouldn’t understand his journey with Jesus. So Jesus called a huddle with Peter and the other disciples to help clarify things about the cross for Jesus and the cross for his followers.

Since we are considering what it means to “journey with Jesus” through life let’s connect that thought with what we do when we head out of town. Typically, when we are going to travel somewhere we say goodbye to at least a couple of people—perhaps a friend, a neighbour, or a relative, or maybe someone from our church. In a similar way those who journey with Jesus have some “goodbyes” to say. The disciples were called to say goodbye to what they had been doing and many of the relationships that they had. Of the fishermen that Jesus called to follow him we are told, “They left everything to follow Jesus.” Matthew, the tax collector, walked away

from a lucrative position. We know that there were others who said they would follow Jesus but then they offered reasons why they couldn't completely deny themselves. They couldn't bring themselves to say goodbye to everything else in order to journey with Jesus.

So how about you and me? Jesus has called us to be his followers—to journey through life with him. Through the Word connected with the water of our baptism Jesus extended a call to us to follow wherever he leads. But does our comfortable home, or our comfortable car, or our comfortable bed, stand in the way of our following Jesus? Has Jesus been squeezed into a small corner of our life? Where in the list of priorities does our being a disciple of Jesus fall? Is it the most important priority in our life? Do our family commitments squeeze out our commitment to Jesus? Instead of journeying with Jesus are we being sidetracked or looking away at some person, place, or thing, and not at our relationship to Jesus? It is good for us to hear Jesus say, “any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33)

Our journey with Jesus not only involves “farewells” we might say it also includes luggage. Well, it's not exactly luggage. Again listen to Jesus' words, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In order to journey with Jesus each of us must take up our own cross. But of course we need to know what that means. Jesus carried a cross made out of wood. Should we expect something similar? Or what does a disciple's cross look like? Yes, some of Jesus' followers were actually crucified. In fact, it is believed that the disciple Peter's life was taken that way. But as we let the Bible interpret itself we learn that Jesus had something else in mind when he spoke about his disciples taking up their crosses to follow him. In the most narrow sense the Bible defines a Christian's cross as any suffering that they face because they follow Jesus. So, when a follower of Jesus is persecuted, tortured, imprisoned, or put to death because of their faith they are taking up their cross. Sadly, that is happening to Christians around the world. The cross we carry for Jesus might not be that extreme. It might just be the eye roll of a neighbor or coworker when you say something about being a Christian. A Christian student might be mocked for his or her faith with it seems to be in conflict with popular opinions and human ideas. Or perhaps a follower of Jesus who doesn't join in the office gossip and is ridiculed for it. That too is a cross to bear while journeying with Jesus.

Taking up our cross each day as we journey with Jesus has another side to it as well. It's closely related to what Jesus said about, “denying ourselves.” Our sinful pride, our personal desires for self, our wishes apart from God, must be nailed to the cross. This is something that the Apostle Paul declared so strongly in his letter to the Galatians. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20) “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:24) “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14) Taking up our cross and crucifying our sinful nature is another part of our journey with Jesus. Today, let it be our prayer that he strengthens our resolve to take up our crosses as we follow him.

The third truth about our journey with Jesus is that we follow where he leads us. I imagine that many of you have used the internet to get directions for a trip. You enter your home address and the address of the place where you want to go. But then you have a whole bunch of other questions to answer. You can choose from the shortest route or the easiest route. You can tell some of the map programs whether you want to drive mostly on interstates or on regular highways. Then the computer program produces a set of directions. Perhaps we think we can do the same when it comes to following Jesus. We want to tell him what direction we should go and what kind of trip it will be. It just doesn't work that way when we journey with Jesus. He knows the best route for each of us. He calls on us to trust him each day as he leads us to our eternal home.

Today we have connected those basic ideas to the words of Jesus, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” To journey with Jesus we say goodbye to our self and everyone and everything that will keep us from following Jesus. We take up our cross. That cross is whatever we suffer to follow Jesus. We also take up our cross and put to death our sinful nature. Finally we have the map. Jesus' Word will keep us on the straight and narrow way. Fellow travellers, continue to journey with Jesus in the way that he described for us. Amen.