

I occasionally get sent amusing/provocative emails- recently I got one about the phenomenon of car stickers in the United States, I always do wonder who drives around with those things?! Whenever I see an interesting one I always take a glance at the person who is driving the car! Here are a few car stickers from a recent email:

What If The Hokey Pokey Is What It's All About?  
Zombies ate my stick family!  
Lost your Cat? Try looking under my Tyres!  
I'm Retired — Go Around Me!  
Be Nice to America or we will bring Democracy to your country!  
Do You Follow Jesus This Closely?

That last one is a good one. It's funny but like all good humour there is an element of truth to it. From time to time we need to examine how closely we are following Jesus. Sometimes we talk a big game about Jesus. We ask, "What would Jesus do?" We want to be like Christ. We claim to be followers of Christ but how closely are we following him and what does it mean to follow him?

Mark's account of the Transfiguration is a good example of how misguided we can sometimes be about following Jesus. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain for a spiritual retreat. Jesus started to glow and Elijah and Moses appeared to them. Peter thought it would be a good idea for all of them to stay up on that mountain and he even offered to help build a house for all of them. What Peter did not realise was that the special moment on that mountain was not about escaping the world on a retreat; it was about God confirming once again that Jesus was his Son and he would die and then rise from the dead. As they followed Jesus back down that mountain he tried to tell them, but they still did not understand. They did not understand that they were following a man who would die and then live again and if they were serious about following him, they would have to die too.

Following Jesus is the greatest thing in the world but it is also the hardest thing in the world to do. Following Jesus is more than coming to worship once a week. Following Jesus is more than reading the Bible or taking communion occasionally. Following Jesus is more than letting someone in front of you in traffic on High St.

Most people don't realise that when Christ calls people he calls them to come and die. What many don't understand is that to experience the abundant life in Christ, we have to take up a cross and die.

Jesus was clear about this from the very beginning. Huge crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. There was this certain energy about him, he had charisma. He had a way with words. He performed miracles. He challenged people in authority. He loved everyone, especially the left out, thrown out, and the down and out. Who wouldn't love someone like that?

One day Jesus looked over a huge crowd that was following him and he wondered if they really knew what it meant to follow him. Then with no regard to "How to Win Friends and Influence People," Jesus spoke some of the hardest words we find any- where in the gospels.

He said, “Do you really want to follow me? Consider what it is going to cost you. You must give up everything that is dearest to you, take up a cross, and follow me. Unless you do that, you cannot be my disciples.”

That is not what the crowd wanted to hear. They hoped that if they followed him they would share in his power and glory. What they did not realise was that when Jesus said these words he was on his way to Jerusalem — to the cross, and to follow him meant you were also willing to take up a cross. The Bible does not mention it one way or the other but I imagine that after Jesus spoke these words most people in the crowd fell back from Jesus, disappointed and dejected looking for another feel good preacher.

I suspect that most of us are like that crowd one way or another. Most often we follow Jesus from a distance. We seek Jesus for the perks and benefits. We want to be on the hopeful side of things. We want to have good morals and values. We want to have someone we can pray to when we need help or need a miracle. We want our eternal salvation to be secure. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with any of these things, but we are not always prepared to follow Jesus closely because we know it will cost us.

The truth is that important, sacred, and virtuous things in life have a cost. The glowing bride and excited groom stand before me at the altar. The bride is thinking, “Oh, this is the man of my dreams. He is going to bring me flowers every day. He is going to know what I am thinking and know exactly what to say. He is going to hang on my every word and always be patient with me. He will always just want to cuddle. He is going to rub my feet whenever I ask and surprise me with breakfast in bed.” The groom is thinking, “Oh, this is the woman of my dreams. She is always going to look this young and beautiful. She will always meet my needs. She will always greet me when I get home with a wink, my favourite meal next to my lazy boy, and Foxtel sports on the television. She will always tell me how strong, brilliant, and gifted I am. And she will never nag me.”

The bride and groom are not really paying attention when I ask them to repeat the words, “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” Then, sooner or later, one of them disappoints the other by not living up to expectations and real marriage begins. One of them gets sick or one of them becomes difficult to live with and real love and commitment begin. Acceptance, forgiveness, and mutual understanding are born.

All the important things in life cost us. We should not be surprised to find that when the most important person who ever lived spoke about the most important thing we could ever do, he said that sacrifice is required, a cross is required, and death is required. Why? Jesus put it poignantly, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

You see, real life begins when we die to ourselves — when we die to control — when we die to our selfish desires, petty distractions and trivial plans. Real life in Christ begins when we surrender our ego, our pride, and our nit -picking stubbornness. Real life in Christ begins when we stop being angry over minor things at the expense of a whole service of worship and praise to the Almighty. God can get started on us when we come to the place where we are free from the captivity of trite preoccupations and recognise that our only need is God. This is what it means to die.

There are many who never accept this. This is why Church attendance has declined in the West. This is why there are people who have been Christians all their lives who are never spiritually fulfilled. This is why there are Christians who never grow in their faith. They have never made the decision to be a disciple. Until you become a disciple you will never experience the abundant life. Until you carry a cross and die you can never really live.

If we want God to use us, we must make ourselves available, empty our lives of the things that have become more important than God and allow God to cleanse us and renew us. We must come to the place where we pray, "God, I am tired of doing things on my own. I am tired of thinking I know what is best. I am tired of criticising anything that is new or challenges me. I am tired of doing the same things expecting to get different results. I want you to take over my life. I hand all of it over to you. I let go of the things that I have made more important than you and ask you to fill me up. Use me!" If that is your honest prayer, God will move like a tidal wave in your life! Come take up your cross and die. Your life is waiting. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton