

“By believing – life in his name!”

Sunday 11 April 10

Ray Hawkins

Readings:

Revelation 1: 4 – 8

John 20: 19 – 31

I love walking although I don't seem to find much time these days to get out very often. For serious walking in the countryside you need the right equipment:

- Walking boots
- Warm, wind proof clothing
- Trekking poles – to reduce the stress on the knees
- Food and water
- Map – appropriate scale
- Compass.

It is no good though having a map if you don't know how to read it and it is no good having a compass if you don't know how to use it. Nowadays you can get a Global Positioning System (GPS) but again you have to know how to use it.

Whether it is map and compass or GPS you must have belief in them, belief that they are accurate and up to date. The equivalent of GPS in a car is the 'Sat Nav' and we hear almost daily of horror stories of people putting all their belief and trust in them – to the extent that commonsense seems to disappear completely!

E.G. earlier this week: using his Sat-Nav a trucker driving from Turkey to Gibraltar ended up 1,600 miles away – on a narrow lane on a nature reserve near Skegness.

When walking in the country you need to be able to:

- find and stay on the right footpath
- Discern between footpaths and false trails such sheep tracks.

In clear weather it's easy to see your way - spot landmarks and often there is no need for map or compass. But in the hills or mountains the weather can change very quickly and a clear blue sky can suddenly become overcast or stormy.

In such situations you can find yourself engulfed in cloud with low visibility with landmarks totally obscured and it is then that the map and compass become essential.

On a trip to Switzerland we enjoyed a nice warm sunny picnic at Kleine Scheidegg 2061m or 6762ft high - for comparison Ben Nevis is only 4370ft high.

Suddenly it turned very cold as cloud rapidly descended. The mountains disappeared from view and a storm threatened so it was time to catch the train back down to the safety of the valley.

As the train meandered down to Grindlewald we passed in and out of cloud and at one stage we even looked down on a rainbow!

Following Jesus is a bit like going for a walk in the countryside – we need to be properly equipped if we are to keep on the straight and narrow way and we need to be prepared for anything we meet on the way. In order to follow Jesus the map we need is the bible, the compass is the cross of Jesus.

I would just like to read a short section from John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress that illustrates this point very well.

Pilgrim's Progress is one of the classic books for Christians, but for those who haven't read it the pilgrim is called Christian who is burdened down with sin. Evangelist has helped him and directs him to a narrow wicker gate. Having eventually reached the gate and been dragged inside he is shown wonderful things by the gatekeeper, called Goodwill.

"Goodwill says to Christian, come with me awhile, and I will show you the way you must go. Look ahead of you - do you see this narrow way? It was constructed by the patriarchs and prophets and by Christ and His apostles, and it is as straight as a ruler can make it. This is the way you must go."

"But are there no bends or turns so a stranger might lose his way?" Christian asked.
"Yes, there are many ways adjoining this, and they are crooked and wide. But you can distinguish the right from the wrong, since only the right way is straight and narrow."

Now I could see in my dream that the Highway Christian was to travel on was protected on either side by a Wall, and the Wall was called Salvation. Burdened Christian began to run up the Highway, but not without great difficulty because of the load he was carrying on his back.

He ran this way until he came to a place on somewhat higher ground where stood a Cross. A little way down from there was an open Grave. And I saw in my dream that just as Christian approached the Cross, his Burden came loose from his shoulders, fell from his back, and began to roll downward until it tumbled into the open Grave to be seen no more.

After this, Christian was glad and light-hearted. He joyfully exclaimed, "Through His sorrows He has given me rest and through His death He has given me life!"

Then he stood still for a while to examine and ponder the Cross; for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the Cross alone had brought him complete deliverance from his Burden. So he continued to look and watch until springs of tears welled up in his eyes and came pouring down his cheeks.

Then, as he stood watching and weeping, three Shining Ones suddenly appeared and greeted him. "Be at peace!" the first announced. "Your sins are forgiven!" The second one stripped off his tattered clothing and dressed him in bright garments. After this the third one set a mark upon his forehead and handed him a Scroll with a seal on it. He directed Christian to study the Scroll as he travelled to present it upon his arrival at the Celestial Gate. They then left Christian, and he leaped for joy three times as he went on his way singing".

When Christian is shown the way he asks whether there are any bends or turns that could cause one to get lost. Good-will's response is that although there is only one straight and narrow way, there are indeed many offshoots.

In other words the road to follow Jesus is just like the footpaths we use in the countryside - it is criss-crossed with other paths some will look to be the right way or even easier ways. So those who are careless and self-willed may be easily led astray and their belief in Jesus severely challenged.

The solution is very simple we must avoid deviating from the straight and narrow way. When we are out walking we do this by staying alert and frequently referring to our maps and using our compasses so that we stay on the correct path, especially when conditions become difficult.

In the same way when we are following Jesus we need to keep alert by reading and studying our bibles and keeping our eye on the cross of Jesus. As Proverbs 14:12 says:

'There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.'

We need to be aware that there are many pitfalls or temptations Satan will put in our path to divert us away from the true path to challenge our faith. Peter warned the churches of Asia Minor:

'Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.' (1 Peter 5:8)

Satan may be no match for Jesus but, on the other hand, we are no match for him if we rely on our own strength. Temptations may be so subtle we miss them until it is too late and we find ourselves in trouble - just like taking the wrong footpath or meeting stormy weather when out walking.

In Pilgrim's Progress Christian's burden fell off when he stood before the cross of Jesus. Christian receives release from his burden of sin because he believed in Christ's finished work on the cross. In exactly the same way we too must put our complete belief or trust in Jesus for there is no other way to be saved.

Remember those words of Christian's from Pilgrim's Progress:

"Through His sorrows He has given me rest and through His death He has given me life!"

The story of Jesus' life, his death and his resurrection is an amazing one. Christ, the sinless Son of God, was degraded; he was humiliated, tortured, and murdered as he paid the penalty for our sins.

This is the absurdity of the Christian faith - God turned the most evil act in history into the greatest possible good for the world. It is so amazing and absurd as to be unbelievable, but it is true and is one we must believe or we won't achieve new life.

Carlo Carretto expressed this in these wonderful words:

Jesus' resurrection makes it impossible for man's story to end in chaos — it has to move inexorably towards light, towards life, towards love.

(‘The Desert in the City’, Christianity Today, Vol. 38, no. 4.)

If we look at the disciples' lives after meeting Jesus there are four key phrases that were important for them that are as equally important for us here and now:

- ‘Follow me’
- “I have seen the Lord!”
- ‘Peace be with you’!
- ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Follow me’ – and they did! Jesus still calls people and we need to listen quietly and patiently for Jesus' call to us. Are we listening and will we follow His calling?

Mary's words to the disciples having met the risen Lord were “I have seen the Lord!” - Five words that turned the lives of the disciples upside down. Jesus still meets with people - are we prepared for a personal encounter with Jesus our Lord?

‘Peace be with you’! - When we accept and believe in Jesus we have peace with God through Jesus and we should remember that God love us all and so we must strive to love one another, so that people may see Jesus active in our lives.

‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ - If we have responded to Jesus' call, met with him and received his peace into our lives then we should be prepared to receive and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The disciples were not sure what the future held for them, but Jesus warned them and us not to expect an easy life. An excellent example of this is found in the book of Daniel when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are ordered by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow down and worship a golden idol or be thrown into a fiery furnace. Their response:

‘... If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not ... we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up’.
(Daniel 3: 16 – 18)

This must be one of the most powerful statements and demonstrations of faith in the bible. For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego there could be no compromise in their belief in God and they were prepared to die rather than compromise their faith.

They were thrown into a furnace, but God was with them and they emerged without even scorch marks on their clothes.

Similarly we will face difficult times but now we can face this future confident if we believe and trust in Jesus – for then we can be sure he will be with us.

The cross of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Gospel – Romans 5:8:

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Christ's sacrifice was not a partial payment but a full and perfect payment once and for all time. Through the cross, eternal life is extended to all.

The three angels Christian sees as he stands before the cross symbolize the work of all three members of the Trinity for our salvation:

- The Father forgives our sins,
- The Son strips us of our sinful garments and clothes us with His righteousness, and
- The Holy Spirit seals us with a mark of ownership and protection and gives us assurance of our salvation.

As forgiven people we have the responsibility to serve Jesus and do his will in our lives. The road of discipleship is the road of the cross.

Christ alone has opened the door to God for us. He should be the centre of our lives. If he isn't then we will stray from the straight and narrow - we will get lost in life's inevitable storms as we try to follow Jesus.

Jesus wants us to believe totally in him; he has shown us the way to eternal life.

"Through His sorrows He has given me rest and through His death He has given me life!"

Believe in Jesus ... life in his name!