

Jesus is Passing By...

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[0 : 00] I'd like us now to turn to the New Testament passage that we read together, the Gospel by Matthew in chapter 9, and looking there at verse number 9 in particular.

As Jesus went out from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. It must have been a red letter day for Matthew when Jesus passed by and said, come with me. And there's a very real sense in which Jesus is still passing by. Derek, our minister, I'm not taking your name in vain, Derek, sometimes mentions that one of the most interesting and privileged things we have in our Kirk session is the opportunity to hear the stories of those who are interviewed for baptism or church membership. We hear how they have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Each person's story is different. Some have been brought up in homes where they were nurtured in the Gospel, in churches where they were nurtured in the Gospel, and they have early come to know and to love and follow Jesus Christ. Others come, they had no Christian input in their early days until somebody or something introduced them to the Christian faith, and this resulted in them becoming Christians. But the one thing that all of these stories have in common is that they are centred in Jesus Christ, and it emphasises the fact for us that you cannot be a Christian without knowing Jesus. You cannot be a Christian without knowing Jesus. That's a very emphatic statement, but it's one that is crucial to our understanding of what a Christian really is. If one was to give a working definition of what a Christian is, leaving aside a lot of theological jargon, as it were, it's just this that a Christian is a person who has met God in Christ, who trusts in Christ for salvation and who obeys Christ as Lord. A person who has met God in Christ trusts Christ for salvation and obeys Christ as Lord. The first point that that little definition makes is that when we meet Jesus, we meet with God. In Paul's letter to the Philippians in chapter 2 and in his letter to the Colossians in chapter 1, Paul shows us beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ is the Divine and Eternal Son of God. The Eternal Son of God equal in power and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, that mysterious trinity who is God. In the Colossians passage, Paul says concerning Christ that the fullness of the deity dwells in him, so that when we meet with Jesus, we meet with God. And I believe that we cannot be Christian people unless we accept that truth. I was reading just the other day in the newspaper about a poll that was taken of people who had some connection with church. And it said that most people accepted the historical reality that there was a person called Jesus of Nazareth. But very few of these people who were found in church believed that he was the Divine Son of God. You cannot be a Christian unless you believe that because that is what Jesus claimed for himself. And if you don't believe what he claimed for himself, it's not worth following or believing it. He is the Divine Son of God. We meet God in Christ, that's fundamental to the whole Christian story. And it's the only way that we can come to understand how today we are able to do what Jesus said to [7 : 33] Matthew to do when he passed him on the street in Capernaum that day. Matthew, follow me. Jesus is not just a figure from history. One who lived, died, but is now of no contemporary relevance.

Jesus lives, he died, but he rose again. He is God eternal, not just in heaven, but alongside us. He's passing by and he speaks to us and he wants a response. And the way that Matthew tells the story, it's as if he came to the Kirk Session and Derek asked him, Matthew, just tell us in your own words how you became a Christian. And so here is Matthew's account. It's very short, it's very direct. And in it we are told about a challenge. Jesus said, follow me. We find that there is a cost. Matthew rose up and as Luke tells us, he left everything and followed Christ. And if I can fast forward a bit, we'll also find a climax. But that comes further on. First then, in these words of Matthew, I want us to see the challenge of the gospel. Jesus said to him, follow me. You will find that these two words are the most common words that Jesus uses when he spoke to people about

becoming Christians. He's very direct, very personal, and it doesn't leave room for any doubt as to what a Christian truly is, a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us in the Gospel by Luke in chapter 19 and verse 10, why he came into the world. He said that he had come to seek and to save that which was lost. And the Apostle Paul tells us that without Christ we are all lost and we're without hope cut off from God. Our sin has blinded us to spiritual realities and God has turned us back against us because of our sin. And it leaves us condemned and cut off for God, from God, forever. Except that it is only through Christ that all that is impossible for us to do by ourselves as far as salvation is concerned has all, and I want to stress the all in this, it has all been done for us by Jesus Christ. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. And when he walked up the street that day in Capernaum and spoke to Matthew, he spoke to a man who was lost but one whom he came to seek and to save. Well you might be thinking that it's all very well. Jesus did walk up the street in Capernaum and he did speak to a man called Matthew. Matthew saw him coming. I've no doubt that Jesus passed the time of day with Matthew very often as he walked up and down that busy main road in Capernaum. It's very likely too that Matthew had heard Jesus preaching, perhaps had witnessed the miracles that Jesus wrought. It may well be that Matthew had had conversations in his family about Jesus. One of his own brothers had become a disciple of Jesus and both of them were named by their father's name. So there may well have been a lot of Christian input in that family but Matthew was the black sheep of the family if you like, a tax collector and would have been almost disowned by his own people. But now Jesus spoke to him directly and Matthew was challenged as to whether or not he was going to respond. We may think that Jesus doesn't do that today but the Bible assures us that he does. We may not see Jesus with our eyes but he is present among us. He tells us that where we are gathered in his name there he is in our midst, Matthew 18 and 20. And this is where the truth comes about meeting God in Jesus Christ.

[14:12] God is alive, God is present everywhere and this same Jesus who walked down the road in Capernaum is among us today and he is speaking to us today through his word, this living word of God and he is saying to you as he says to me, follow me. We can form a living relationship with him when we respond positively to the challenge. When we say yes Jesus I will follow you trusting in all that you have done for my salvation, for my forgiveness, for my future. I will follow Jesus, Matthew rose and followed him. That leads me to ask how about you, the challenge.

But this little story also speaks to us about the cost. Matthew tells his story very simply, he just says he got up and followed Christ. Luke tells us a little more about Matthew's decision. He calls him by his Hebrew name of Levi and he says that he got up and left everything and followed Christ. And friends that is it exactly. You cannot be a follower of Jesus and hold on to the old way of life which Jesus died to save you from.

Not good grammar but I want to emphasise that. You have to as it were move house and home. If we are to trust Jesus as our saviour then remembering our definition of a Christian, one who has met God and Christ, trusted Christ for salvation we obey him as Lord and that obedience can be costly. It involves moving, moving from what we wear to what he wants us to be or to become. Just imagine you are in a house surrounded by familiar things which you like and you are satisfied but one day a notice comes which says the building is condemned and you have got to move.

[17:35] But the notice also tells you that there is a new home provided for you free of charge.

And you look around and you say well what can I take with me to this new place? For these are things that I like but when you see the new place you know that that sweet is not going to fit and that old wardrobe which you thought a lot of just wouldn't get in.

And there is so much in our lives that when we come to follow Christ they just don't fit into the new life that he wants us to live. So someone comes along beside us and says listen it's the words of Jesus who says if you are going to follow me you must deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me. And this same voice will say to us you've got to change, you've got to move but you might think well how can I change?

What do I have to move to? Will I be able to keep it up? What's going to happen to me? And then we find that the mysterious voice is that of the Holy Spirit and he is in one sense a great furniture remover and he knows what does not fit into our new home where Jesus is going to be a guest as well and the Holy Spirit is pretty radical with us and this is where the cost comes in. So let me tell you the stuff that he takes to the tip as it were. He tells us this for example in Galatians 5 about things that must go, sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition,

divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except our small clique, envy, drunkenness, wild parties and other kinds of sins. Well you might say that that's not my life and who would want to live in that kind of life anyway. Friends that's a picture of your heart and my heart if it is unsaved. There may be some things there that are more prominent in some lives than in other lives but it's a heart that's laid bare before the Holy

Gaze of the Spirit of God and it's the kind of heart that's got to go to the tip by God's grace and help. But if the Holy Spirit is a great furniture remover you'll find that he's also a terrific interior designer because he's got things laid out for you in the new life that he wants you to live and he tells us the things that he's put in for us in that same chapter in Galatians for example. He puts in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control and when you compare the old and the new it's not just a great contrast but we realise just how bad the old was and how good the new is. God never asks us to put away what is good from your life. He only puts out what is destructive to our spiritual, our best spiritual interests.

[22 : 57] I mentioned that the Holy Spirit helps us to move but actually that same spirit has been there all along helping us to listen to the voice that's challenging us, helping us to respond to that challenge and he'll help us also to meet the cost if we follow Christ. There may indeed be additional costs in following Jesus. We find that Matthew's life which was an eminently productive one in Christian things but it wasn't an easy one. Many traditions have grown up around the name of Matthew. Some contradict each other so they have to be thrown away but there's one very persistent one which tells us that Matthew was martyred for his faith. He was killed in Syria. Some things don't seem to change. We too will have to face trials and temptations as we walk in obedience to our Lord.

Persecution of one kind or another may be our lot too but like Matthew once you become a follower of Jesus you would never want to go back to the old way from which he saved you.

There's a challenge and there's a cost and so we come to the climax and I don't mean by climax that Matthew died as a martyr. The climax for Matthew and for you and for me if we are Christian people doesn't come in this life. It comes in the life to come in heaven and heaven is a place where all who follow Jesus here on earth will go to spend eternity with Jesus, with the Lord who called him to follow him. And in the last book of the Bible, the book which started our service today, we read from chapter 5 but later on in the book of Revelation where we have some splendid pictures of life in that glorious place. One of the pictures we're given in chapter 14 and it has a very interesting little detail there which shows us that those who followed Jesus here on earth are still following Jesus in heaven for we read there that the people, the Jesus people followed the Lamb Jesus wherever he goes in heaven. You see friends it's an attachment that will never be broken when we respond to Christ positively. It's an attachment forever. So a Christian is a person who has met God in Christ, trusts him as saviour and obeys him as Lord. Matthew shows us the way. Jesus says to you today, follow me.

See my question is will you? He never casts out anyone who comes to him. Amen. Let us pray.

Dear Lord, our Heavenly Father, speak to us today. Help us to hear the voice of Jesus saying follow me. May there be a glad positive response in the heart of each one of us saying yes to Jesus. I will follow and we thank you for the assurance that those who make that great decision will never be cast away. May it be Lord that on this first day of a new year it will be indeed a day of grace starting a year of grace for all of us.

[29 : 06] In Jesus name we pray. Amen.