

THE EASIEST PARABLE

Jesus said “Follow me.” And Peter, Andrew, James, John, and quite a few others took Jesus’ invitation at face value and followed Him. “Quite a few others” hardly covers the full significance of the two thousand years between then and now. Many of us still consider ourselves to be “followers of Jesus.” It is a very important concept for lots of us. In fact, the most important thing in all of life.

Of course, it is not at all important to many other people. It is just a cliché, a familiar phrase without meaning or content. It is a phrase bandied about in so many settings, in so many different ways, that it means very little – perhaps nothing at all. “I am a follower of Jesus.” Does that tell anybody anything about me? Does that mean they can trust me? Does that suggest that I am well-disciplined, or honest, or a nutcase, or in any way at all different from anybody else they might meet? It might mean a lot of things to me – and I can assure you that it does. But it is no longer a phrase that carries any particular meaning in our society. “I am a follower of Jesus.” (Okay, if you say so. Whatever.)

If I said I was a follower of Obama or of Romney, that would have far greater meaning and cause a far greater reaction. Isn’t that weird? By the way, I am not a follower of either of them. Nor can I imagine being a follower of anybody other than Jesus. What if King Herod (Antipas or Archelaus) had said “Follow me” and we had responded? What kind of life would that have led us into? There are lots of ways in which Augustus Caesar did say “Follow me!” But none of “my people” did that – not with heart or soul or mind or strength. Only Jesus calls me into a Life so much better and beyond my own, that I truly want to follow. The thought of following any other – in this same manner, to this same degree, with this same kind of full-hearted devotion – is a horrible thought indeed. Egregious! Revolting!

If I follow anyone else, I end up a shriveled shell – a slave to some paltry plan and purpose no better, and often worse, than what I myself might devise. If I follow Jesus, I end up freed, loved, valued beyond my own understanding – set on a course of endless discovery and exploration. “Come, meet my Father. He has long loved you, and you will find him wonderful. He is the designer beyond all that is, and you will find it more wonderful than you have ever imagined.”

I know; too much preamble. Just wanted to remind myself, and perhaps some of you, who it is that is telling this parable.

We have just left Zacchaeus' house in Jericho and the wonderful story of how Jesus and Zacchaeus became friends. That means Jesus is on His way from Jericho to Jerusalem for Palm Sunday. We are at the tail end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Things are fast coming to a head and, as we know, to a bitter conclusion. Why does Jesus tell this parable? Two reasons are stated outright. First, Jesus is nearing Jerusalem. He knows what is going to happen. He is the only one who knows, despite all His efforts to tell His disciples. They will not listen or believe Him. They know Jesus is the promised Messiah, but clearly they think Jesus is confused about how the story is supposed to end. "*They supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.*" And that is the second reason given for telling this parable. The disciples insist on believing the traditional ending to Messiah's coming: Messiah will be victorious. Messiah will right all wrongs and establish Israel as the preeminent nation and people on earth. And they, especially the chosen twelve, will ride Messiah's coattails into fame, riches, and glory.

I hardly need to remind you that there is still a great desire to tell the story this way. More than a few preachers are still trying to promise their people that this is what will happen to anybody who is truly faithful and believing. Don't be "left behind"! Join, give, and help to make us successful and prominent right here and now.

By the way, the disciples were not completely wrong. Wrong dimension and bad timing, but aside from that: Messiah *was* victorious, just not in the way or manner in which anybody expected. They *would*, in a manner of speaking, ride His coattails into fame, riches, and glory – just not in this world, not in this realm. They would all die first, all but two of them as martyrs.

So Jesus tells this parable still hoping to straighten out their thinking. He is going away to be coronated, crowned, declared the true and rightful King – and by the only true authority there is. We call that the Resurrection. But in the meantime, what will His followers do when He is gone from this realm?

It is true that Herod Archelaus, the eldest of the three sons of Herod the Great, wanted to be named king in his father's place, after his father died in 4 B.C. A delegation of fifty Jews of high reputation sailed to Rome

to protest against this appointment. Augustus Caesar appointed Herod Archelaus as ethnarch (not king) over one-third of Israel, with the understanding that if Archelaus governed well, this appointment would be changed from ethnarch to king. Archelaus was on probation, we would say. We would expect that this might cause him to be on his best behavior. But it is not easy for most of us to change very much, no matter what the incentive. Two years later, instead of Augustus appointing him king, Archelaus was banished to France (Vienna in Gaul). After that, Jerusalem and Judea were governed by a Roman procurator – Pilate being the name of one of them that most of us know.

So details can illuminate, but we can also get lost in them. Nobody at the time, hearing this parable, would fail to recognize the parallel patterns between the parable and the story of Archelaus. But why would Jesus associate His own kingship with Archelaus, a cruel and ineffective ruler who could not hold on to his appointment for even two years? Was this “dark humor” – Jesus musing that on the opposite end of the spectrum, He wouldn’t be able to hang onto His kingship in this world for very long either?

Archelaus was banished when Jesus was only a little boy. My hunch is that Jesus gives His parable a setting that is familiar and believable, but that He does not intend for us to get hung up on the story of Archelaus. I only mention it to dismiss it – and because nearly all commentaries try to go there, but without getting anywhere.

So back to the parable. Jesus knows He is going away – i.e., He is going to be killed, not coronated in our realm as the true King. His followers will be stunned – doubly so because they would not or could not “take in” what Jesus had been trying to tell them. After the shock, and indeed after the Resurrection, His followers will begin to wrestle with new realities:

- Jesus was and is indeed the true King (Messiah/Christ).
- The world as presently constituted has not closed down, as expected when Messiah came.

The New Kingdom (though real because the true King is real) has not come in any fullness here on earth. So *now* what? Indeed, that has been a huge question ever since. Jesus is real, and the rightful King. And Jesus

is alive and present in our midst. Yet it is the same old lost and broken world. Aside from our awareness of the living presence of Jesus, only one other thing has changed.

Well, lots of things continue to change in terms of the outer physical world. Information expands. Scientific and technological advances continue to amaze us – continue to bless or terrify us. But in terms of relationships, spiritual development, and the way our world runs and is run – nothing has changed very much. In terms of who we are, what we are like, what we are here for, and the quality of life that people enjoy on this planet, that does not seem to change very much for very many people. Aside from our awareness of the living presence of Jesus, only one other thing has changed: We are the church. We get to form and live in communities of faithful people who have been awakened to a different awareness, to a different reality, to different values and purposes.

Oh yes, I notice it too: Most organizations that are called “churches” are not true churches. They have somehow been sucked back into the world. They are no longer the “*ecclesia* of Jesus.” Yet many of them do have an “*ecclesia* of Jesus” hidden and active somewhere within the outer organization. They follow Jesus, even though the outer organization is mostly about survival and numbers, about entertainment and advertising, about running along on the surface of things. And then there are also gatherings of people that do not carry the name of “church” which are in fact true churches.

Jesus knew what was coming. And He knew that any of us who were “awakened” in any way would have a question and a problem: Since the Kingdom did not come in any fullness and since life as we know it did not shut down here, now what do we do? Jesus told this parable for us.

Now what do we do? “*Engage in business until I come.*” (Luke 19:13) Yes, He has already come – returned as Holy Spirit. It is the major truth and blessing and new reality of our lives. But let’s not be cute; Jesus was putting it in words His followers would understand at the time: “Engage in business until the Kingdom comes in its fullness – until you are taken to the next dimension; until you are no longer in this broken, troubled world.”

So now I imagine a bit of dialogue between myself and Jesus. That is always foolish, and it is bound to be wrong in some ways. But hopefully you will forgive me.

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JESUS: “I have actually invested far more in you than most of you realize. While you are sitting around with nothing better to do, waiting for “kingdom come,” bring me some return on my investment in you – on the gifts and abilities I have placed in you.”

This is not like anything I would have expected to hear from Jesus. Certainly not at this point in His ministry – not as a parting instruction. What would I expect to hear? “Feed the hungry. Go as a missionary to Africa. Fight for justice. Heal the sick. Walk on water.” What I do hear is so counterintuitive that I have a hard time hearing it. I keep forgetting it, minimizing it, or looking for some better parable or more inspiring truth. “*Engage in business until I come.*” Maybe the Chamber of Commerce or Wall Street or some Republican neighbor might say this, but Jesus, the Christ of God? How am I to hear this parable?

Me: “[expletive expletive expletive] I was trying to make a living – trying to succeed in business – *before* you came. I want something more exciting, more thrilling, more glorifying, more spiritual now. Did you really tell this parable?”

JESUS: “Well, forgive the contradiction, but actually you were *not* doing this before I came. Most certainly you were not doing it for me. You were not doing it in my way, or in partnership with me, or according to my instructions. You were doing it for yourself and in ways you thought would work. You were hoping to impress the world around you, or at least the people you thought were important. I am asking you to ‘engage in business’ with me and for me – and until I give you permission to stop. And if you claim you were anywhere close to such a purpose or endeavor before we knew each other, you are deluding yourself.”

Me: “You know, I don’t think this is ever going to get me the spiritual high I was hoping for. This sounds like responsibility, hard work, toil, planning, patient endurance, duty – all the things I thought knowing *you* was going to get me out of. And the reward? If I work really hard, invest, and bring a good return on the mina you gave me – oh joy upon joy, then I get to work even harder? You will put me in charge of ten cities and I will have to try to manage the welfare and prosperity of everybody in those ten cities? Terrific! And if I do that well, then what? A hundred cities? No rest for the weary? Serve more and more? This is not inspiring me.”

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JESUS: “You bring interesting complaints. You want an assignment with more spiritual kick to it? Something that sounds grand, loving, compassionate, caring – maybe something that will bring you more renown among your peers as a wonderful and caring person? Yet if I give you a chance to make a real difference for real people, then you don’t like it. I am always short of people who know how to work and manage and invest in partnership with me. I am always short of people I can trust to care about others in the responsible and solid ways that make a real difference. Yet if I offer you a chance to help me – not in the ethereal woo-woo realms of imagination that the world loves to cheer because it doesn’t really believe in me, but in hard-core, down-to-earth, solid, and responsible ways that change people’s lives, that last, that go on bringing benefits and blessings year after year – then you want to complain and quit before we have even started.

“You want to save the people of Uganda, many thousands of miles away – people you will never know or even see. But you can’t be bothered with marriage vows; or providing for your family; or building up your own faith family so that it might reach others; or caring about some of the people you *do* know who are really struggling. That is not grand enough, spiritual enough, or Christian enough for you? By the way, I am already in Uganda, and I already love the people there. You don’t have to go play ‘Savior’ in my place.”

Me: “Wow, I didn’t know you were this way – hard-nosed, realistic, and not very sympathetic. Even to the poor guy in the parable who was scared half to death – so frightened he hid your mina away in a handkerchief. I’m not sure I would ever have wanted you to be our King, if I had known what you were really like or that you were such a hard taskmaster.”

JESUS: “Glad you are waking up! Maybe you have caught on just in time. Perhaps you haven’t paid as much attention to my story as you think you have. Do you have the impression that I have ever been soft-hearted and wishy-washy toward people who make excuses instead of repenting; who don’t mind letting others take care of them and pull all the weight for them; who don’t keep their promises; who are never really honest with themselves, never mind with their neighbors or even with God? And I wonder how you are imagining that we are all going to get ready – get in training – for the real Kingdom of Heaven? Is it back to magic and superstition?”

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“I am your Savior, not your meal ticket. True community is always based on everyone pulling their fair share of the load. My friend Paul knew it and said it. There are plenty of places in the New Testament that make it very clear, for anybody willing to pay attention. You are doing weird things with the Message today. You are even convincing lots of people that if you care enough to try to help them, then that means they can be content to be ‘on the take’ forever. When love, gratitude, and caring become a one-way street, doesn’t that tell you that something is terribly wrong? Can you imagine any kind of Kingdom of Heaven based on that kind of principle: ‘You should always love me, but I will never ever love you back?’”

Me: “Okay, so what happens if I decide to forget the mina and join the delegation that doesn’t want you to be our King?”

JESUS: “My goodness, are you catching on to the inner principles of a true parable? It’s true: In the parable, everybody is in one camp or the other. They are either wrestling with what to do with the mina I have given them, or they are trying to get me deposed as King. You got that right. And do you imagine that this has changed in the last two thousand years? Do you think most people today really want me to be their King? Look around you! Do you see very many folk who really want me to be their King? I’m not talking about lip service, or the memorized phrases that people repeat or recite without even thinking about what they mean. How many individuals do you actually know who are serious about wanting me to rule in their lives?”

STILL JESUS: “In 30 (or 33) A.D. I had developed a popular movement so strangely powerful that the Jewish authorities had to arrange for my death or I would have been coronated as the rightful Jewish King by popular demand. We were right on the verge of it at Passover time, those many years ago. But I am a deeper, truer King than most people realize. The story, and its reality, goes right on being played out. That is what I came to do, make clear, and set up. Now the story keeps on playing in each new generation. Some do choose me for their King. And for them I am THE KING – the true LEADER – and their lives show it. There is nothing this world can do to stop it. But others – the vast majority – do not choose me for their King. Some try to pretend that they are neutral, or that they haven’t noticed, or that they have excuses ironclad and sufficient enough to get them off the hook.

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“Do they really think my Father and I are stupid enough to believe that? That we are taken in or fooled by the pretense and the game? If you do not choose me for your King, you still have to find some way to get and keep me out of your life. You have to ‘kill me’ in some way – stop my influence over your mind and heart in some manner. I know who I am. I know what I offer and how sincerely I have invited the world to come with me. *He who is not for me, is against me.*”

“Now, be careful. I did not say or imply that I hate anybody just because they are trying to kill me. That part of the story you really need to get clear and keep clear. Nor am I the one who closes down the chances, the endless new opportunities, or the choices after that. But that does not change the reality: people either choose me as their King, or they try in some way to kill me – to get and keep me out of their lives. I do love them – truly and deeply. But mine is a very responsible, hard-core, demanding, and powerful love that truly frees, transforms, and changes people. ‘Unconditional love’ is a figment of some sentimental, theoretical, make-believe artist who has been on valium for too long. ‘Oh, I really love you, but I don’t want anything from you. I don’t want you to pay any attention to me at all.’ Can you imagine anything more insulting, more vapid, more meaningless? Love is the most demanding force in the universe. And it longs for a response from anyone it touches.”

“By the way, the guy who hid the mina and totally flunked the test did not get slaughtered in the parable. He just lost his mina (if you’ll pardon the pun). He lost his chance to serve his Master. That is a sadness beyond definition. Flogging would be nothing in comparison to that. ‘Use it or lose it,’ as the saying goes. But he was not punished in any way, aside from losing what was never his in the first place. He lost a gift he refused to use – and didn’t really want. That’s all.”

HERE ENDETH THE DIALOGUE

Even the end of the parable itself is an interesting and appalling reversal of the real story. In real life, Jesus’ enemies were not killed. They killed *Him*. Many of us have found various ways to do that, and still do. But He keeps waiting and hoping for a change of heart. That does not mean He is soft-headed. Nor does it mean that if we choose Him as our King, we get to reverse all the principles or tell Him how to run His Kingdom.

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What is a mina? Three months' wages is the technically correct answer. A sum of value. A gift, an ability, a skill or talent or capacity that God has given us – and that we can use for Him, if we truly want to. If we invest it – that is, train it, understand it, practice it, hone it – and use it in ways we hope will serve Him.

What kind of return will this bring to His Kingdom? That depends on the gift He gives you, doesn't it? Every parable leaves us to figure some things out for ourselves. Like how we will live, and what we will live for.