

Reflection on Sunday 30 August 2026

by Adrian Walter, Lay Leader of Worship

Gospel: Matthew 16. 21–28



Discipleship - The long walk to freedom

Exactly a year ago today, Stella and I arrived at Cape Town airport. After passing through immigration and collecting our bags, we set off down the corridor that leads to the Avis car hire desk. The corridor is straight and just under 400m long, so about a ¼ mile walk! At several stages along this corridor were large adverts for Nelson Mandela's book, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, which I thought was more than a little appropriate given the long walk to the end of this corridor! It took close to 15 minutes to get to the Avis desk, but the long walk was worth it as I now had freedom in the form of a car!

That's pretty much like the Christian life. The road of discipleship is very long but it's worth it in the end as that is when we finally achieve our freedom – the freedom to be the people God always intended us to be. The Gospel we have just

heard is Jesus preparing His disciples for this long road as it's obvious that the disciples think following Jesus is going to be a walk in the park.

When I read Matthew 16:21–28, I find myself relating to Peter more than I would like to admit. Jesus begins to explain that He must suffer, be killed, and then be raised to life. Peter immediately objects. He doesn't want Jesus to suffer. He wants a better story, an easier road, a happier outcome.

Honestly, I often respond to God's plans in the same way. I am happy to follow Jesus when the road is smooth, but I struggle when obedience leads through disappointment, uncertainty, sacrifice, or pain. Like Peter, I can be tempted to think that God's blessing should always look comfortable and successful. Yet Jesus reminds me that God's ways are often very different from my own.

Now, only verses before in response to Jesus asking the disciples, "...but who do *you* say that I am?" Peter receives Jesus' blessing for blurting out, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God!" So Jesus' next words to Peter must have been particularly difficult for him to hear: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." That verse causes me to pause and reflect. How often am I viewing situations only from my own perspective? How often do I judge what is good or bad based solely on how it affects me, regardless of how it may benefit others? Sometimes I find myself asking God to remove changes I don't like from my life, when perhaps He wants to use those very changes to draw me, and others, closer to Him and to shape my character.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

The part of the passage that speaks most deeply to me is Jesus' invitation: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Although this statement is recorded in three of the four Gospels, only Luke, who gathered his information from extensive research, quotes Jesus as saying, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me." This forces me to realise that following Jesus is not simply about believing the right things; it is about surrendering my whole life to Him... daily. It means trusting Him enough to let go of my own plans when they conflict with His. It means choosing faithfulness even when it costs me something.

Discipleship also challenges our attitudes and relationships. There are times when I want to hold onto hurt or justify my anger, yet Jesus calls me to forgive. There are moments when pride makes me want to prove myself right, but Christ calls me to humility. Sometimes I want recognition for what I do, but following Jesus means serving faithfully even when no one notices. In these situations, denying ourselves is not about losing our identity; it is about allowing Christ to shape our character more than following our own desires will ever do.

I also find that discipleship challenges the way I use my time, resources, and abilities. It is easy to become consumed by personal goals, career ambitions, or the pursuit of comfort. None of these things are wrong in themselves, but they can gradually take first place in our hearts. Jesus continually asks

me to consider whether I am building my life around His kingdom or around my own plans. Sometimes following Him means interrupting my schedule to help someone in need, giving generously when I would rather keep what I have, accepting change when I'm really comfortable with where I am or stepping out in faith when I feel totally unprepared.

What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?

Jesus' question, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?" feels especially relevant today. It is easy to spend so much time chasing achievements, possessions, approval, or success that we lose sight of what truly matters.

In the last three years of my career, I was working in the heart of Government. I had considerable power and influence, recognition and reward. But I was working up to 14 hours a day with travelling on top and I just didn't have time for God. Predictably, it didn't end well and shortly after my retirement, when I thought I was at the top of my game, my world imploded and I was brought to my knees; and were it not for the grace and love of God I certainly wouldn't be standing here today. There are still moments when I want to hold tightly to my own comfort, my own ambitions, and my own sense of control. Yet Jesus has gently but firmly taught me that true life is not found there. His words challenge us to ask ourselves, as I had to, 16 years ago: What am I clinging to that I need to place in God's hands? What am I afraid of losing? Where am I trying to save my life instead of trusting Him with it?

In the mid 1600's, Matthew Henry, the great Bible commentator, wrote that, in encouraging people to follow his example of giving generously to the poor, his father frequently said, "He is no fool who parts with that which he cannot keep, when he is sure to be recompensed with that which he cannot lose." More famously paraphrased some 300 years later by martyred American missionary Jim Elliot as, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

And furthermore, what encourages me most is knowing that Jesus asks nothing of His followers that He was not willing to do Himself. He walked the road of suffering before asking us to follow. He carried the cross before calling us to take up ours. And beyond the cross was resurrection. That gives me hope when discipleship feels difficult. The sacrifices I make for Christ are never meaningless because God is always working toward a greater purpose – our freedom. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." So why would we want to go back to being enslaved by the world with all the burdens that that brings?

The longer I follow Jesus, the more I realise that discipleship is not about achieving perfection. It is about daily surrender. It is choosing, again and again, to place Christ at the centre of my life. Some days that choice feels costly, but Jesus promises that in losing our lives for His sake, we ultimately find the life we were created to live. The daily challenges of discipleship may not always be dramatic, but they are deeply transformative, shaping us little by little into the likeness of Christ.

And if carrying our cross faithfully and daily all sounds a little difficult, the thought I'd like to leave you with, again, is this – He walked the road before asking us to follow Him along it.

Amen.