

You must learn to fall

(Rev. Alan's sermon on Sunday 26 January)

Silence is golden. Unless you have kids of course; then silence is highly suspicious.

It's a well-documented fact that the fastest land animal is a toddler who's been asked, 'What's in your mouth?'.

Joking aside, we live in increasingly suspicious times. Scandal and spin and fake news have combined to make us more and more distrustful of our media; of certain professions and institutions; of authority in general.

By contrast, the fishermen in today's story [Matthew 4. 18-23] seem to have had no such problem. This stranger rocks up, says two words, 'Follow me', and they're off, leaving nets, livelihoods, family and, some would say, their common sense behind.

I've often wondered if Jesus had a certain magnetism. Was he a particularly charismatic personality, an expert, perhaps, in winning friends and influencing people? How else can you explain 12 guys, and scores of others, leaving everything to follow him; no home comforts; no promise of wealth or fame; no guarantee of safety or even personal fulfilment.

And those unlikely disciples must have asked themselves; why me?
Why didn't he go for someone more educated, more religious; better looking?

You see, Rabbis only ever picked the best of the best; those young men (and it was only young men) whose intellectual potential meant that they could follow in their master's footsteps; be like the Rabbi. So, when Jesus says, 'Follow me', he's saying, 'You can be like me'. And that's quite the compliment; an honour, actually; an offer too good to be refused. He's saying, 'I believe in you'. And to the onlooker, Jesus' choice of disciple was a nonsense; an insult to any self-respecting rabbi. Among his band, for example, he chose a traitor, the taxman Matthew who collaborated with the Roman occupation; in another, he chose, in

some people's eyes, a terrorist; Simon the Zealot. And, although airbrushed out by history and most scandalously of all at the time, he chose women.

'Follow me'.

Fast forward two thousand years and those are hard words for a suspicious, commitment-phobic society like ours. We'd be much happier with, 'Listen to me' - a little wisdom is always a welcome thing.

We'd possibly be OK with, 'Talk to me' – a bit of therapy never goes amiss. But 'Follow me'. That's asking too much of too many. Where will it lead? What's the cost? What's the catch?

And yet we humans, we need something bigger than ourselves to believe in; we need something worth following. I think one of the fears of following anything is that either it will let us down, or we will let ourselves down. In my teenage years, the big obstacle to making a commitment to following Jesus was a fear that I just couldn't live up to it; or, more accurately, couldn't live up to the expectations of others. It didn't help that in Northern Ireland, Christians are called 'good living'; they're expected to follow a strict moral code of do's and mostly don'ts.

It took me a long time to realise that being a Christian isn't about following rules, it's about following a person; Jesus. It isn't about being good enough; in fact, if anything it's about recognising and owning and learning from our failures, and then recognising and owning and learning from and relying upon a grace that is good enough; a grace, Paul says, which is 'sufficient'; enough; a grace made perfect in weakness.

You see, the main obstacle to growing in faith is a misguided sense of our own strength. If we're too strong, too capable, too good, then there isn't much room for grace to do its thing. The opposite of faith, as Richard Rohr often says, is control. Faith isn't a blind and dogged certainty; faith is holding on, sometimes by our finger-nails, to the one we choose to believe is worth following; it's a trusting; an entrusting of ourselves to him.

I once heard a story about a guy who was studying in Germany and the German family he was staying with introduced him to the delights of ice-skating, something he'd never attempted before. Now, the family were all real pro's, so they got their boots on, got out there on the ice and got on with it.

The guy got his boots on, got out there on the ice and froze, paralysed with fear; clinging to the side of the rink; a feeling some of us know all too well! And it didn't help that out on the ice toddlers were performing triple salchows.

10 whole minutes passed and still he couldn't bring himself to launch out onto the ice. And then, a little boy, about 6 years old, skated over, did the perfect stop, took his hand and said, 'You must learn to fall'.

Falling down is an integral part of life. It's how we learn. We all mess up; all of us make mistakes, we all fall. And that's as important as it is inevitable. The trick is in how we react to the falling and how we get back up again. Do we get angry with and chastise ourselves; or aim our blame elsewhere; or just give up trying. Or do we dust ourselves off; forgive ourselves if we need to; accept responsibility if we need to; say sorry if we need to, make amends if we need to, and launch out again onto the ice?

One of the major spiritual breakthroughs of my life has been learning how to laugh at myself. When I recognise the mean spirit in me, or fall flat on my face, I've started trying to cut the power of any guilt or shame or embarrassment waiting to flood my system, by laughing at myself and saying, 'There you go again... '.

Our falling teaches us more important home truths than our successes. Our falling will always deepen us in one of two ways: it'll make us more judgemental and cruel; or it'll teach us to be more compassionate and humbler; kinder with others and kinder to ourselves.

'You must learn to fall'.

This fear of falling and failing, of not being good enough, is endemic. All through life we learn to despise our weaknesses; cover them up.

But Jesus says, 'When you're weak and you know it, it's at those times that I am strong, because your weakness forces you to depend on me' [2 Corinthians 12. 1-10].

When the Bishop of London spoke to us deacons as we prepared to be ordained, he said, 'It is through your weakness, your brokenness, that God will shine, not through your gifts'. Be cautious about your gifts...

Someone else put it this way: 'The broken place is the crevice through which the eternal shines'.

Jesus recognised that light within these simple, ordinary, broken fishermen and others; he believed in them when they didn't believe in themselves; he trusted them and entrusted them with his world.

Today, can we hear those same two words, 'Follow me', and leave our suspicion, our cynicism, our distrust behind; can we let go of any shame or guilt or fear of falling, and step forward, trusting that the world needs the cracked light within us and that he will be enough?