Following the Lord and not turning back

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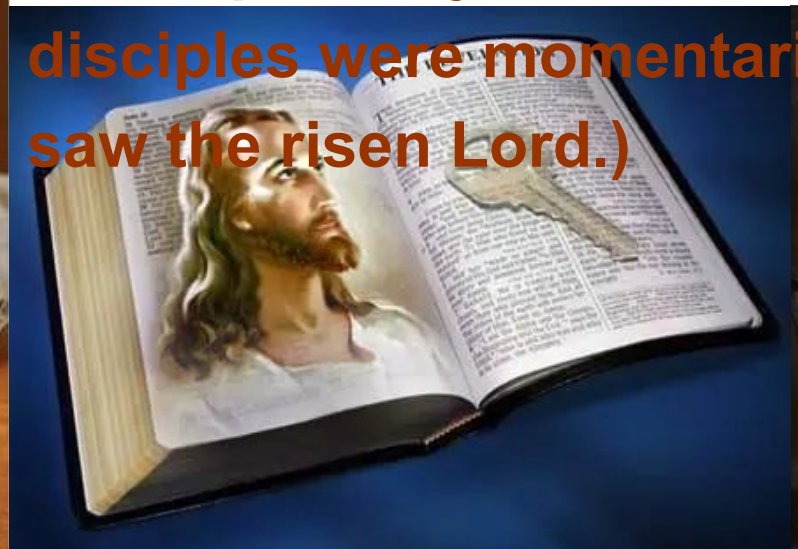
Luke 9: 59-61 "Then (Jesus) said to another, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father. Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.' And another also said, 'Lord, I will follow you, but let me go and bid them farewell who are at my house.' But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'"

As people in western countries move away from, and out of, the Christian Church, this is accompanied by an undeniable decline of knowledge of the Bible, its stories, its beautiful Psalms, the life and teaching of Jesus, the travels and work of the apostles, pre-eminently Paul, and the visions of strange things which the apostle John saw “in the Spirit” (Revelation 1:10). (“In the Spirit” means John’s spiritual eyes were opened, just as the spiritual eyes of the disciples were momentarily opened when they saw the risen Lord.)



It is not surprising that – and, again, in the West – it is often said that we live in "a post Christian Age".

In these circumstances how, then, does the Lord call out to people to follow Him? A growing number of people don't even know Him or only know Him vaguely. Yes, there are still countless Christians witnessing to their following Jesus but, by many, and increasingly, such witnessing is taken less seriously, and sometimes – even – disdainfully. Secularism marginalizes Christianity.

Having said that, Christianity remains a considerable influence in increasingly non-believing countries. It might be through Church run Schools, Universities, Hospitals and provision of aged care. So, there is still an extensive Christian presence in countries of the

Clearly, this is not the only time when religion has been in worrying decline. Way, way, back in Old Testament times and in the midst of the irreligion that was then rampant, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “The LORD’S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; not His ear heavy, that it cannot hear.” (Chapter 59:1). And at the very end of this Chapter, there is this wonderful assurance: “’As for me’, says the LORD, ‘this is my covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendant’s descendants,’ says the LORD, ‘from this time and for ever more.’” (verse 21)

Just four Chapters previous, we find the wonderful reassurance from the LORD that “My

What all these words are saying is that there will always be an awareness in our midst of the Lord's truth and teaching and of the pathway that leads to righteousness and peace. And it is not for us to under-estimate the Lord's strategies for keeping this awareness alive and before people.

We need to keep in mind, also that we live in a time of transition, from one great religious Age to a new spiritual Age. The old is necessarily making way for the new. And this involves:

- the abandonment of old man-made constructions on the teaching of the Word; the misinterpretations which have grown around it like barnacles on a boat;
- the uncertainty and muddled thinking about who Jesus was; the old controlling structures;
- and the shutting down of people's inquiring into what have been described as religious "mysteries".

In the Writings we have a new revelation of truth in our midst given to facilitate the emergence of a new Christian Age.

In the meantime, and until this new Christian Age fully emerges, we can be sure that God is working His purposes out for us.

Jesus said that we need to “be of good cheer” or, to “take courage”. “These things I have spoken to you”, He said, “that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer (literally, “take courage”), I have overcome the world.” John 16:33). The Lord has re-opened doors that had come to be shut; doors through which His influence flows through into the world. We correctly detect forces for good which begin with Him having an impact in the world.

It is these forces for good which are highlighted in what we read in the book, “True Christian Religion”, “There is in fact a sphere continuously radiated by the Lord, which raises all to heaven; this fills the whole of both the spiritual and natural worlds. It is like a strong current in the ocean, which invisibly draws a ship along.” (paragraph 652:3)

"Like a strong current in the ocean"! The Lord is touching the lives of people, for good, continuously.

- It may be through **the good example of another person**.
- It may be through **the Lord re-awakening childhood**, innocent, feelings and beliefs that were cast aside during years of cynicism in adulthood.
- It obviously can be as the result of **some unwanted experience or calamity that overtakes us**. (See "Arcana Caelestia" paragraph 8).

Reflecting on his own experience the writer of Psalm 119 came to see that "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes." (verses 71). I have known people to be affected by the words of a particular song such as has turned their minds to God.

Directly, through His Word, and indirectly, like we have just seen, the Lord is calling everywhere to follow discover the way which leads to heavenly life; to leave (in the apostle Paul's words) the "old man" and to embrace the new. (Ephesians 4: 17-24)

Jesus' call is to lay down our old life and to take into ourselves new life.

The question now is, How do we respond to His call to follow Him?

It might be cautiously, as it was with Nathanael who,when Philip urged him to come and meet Jesus, he expressed his reservations, wondering, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Or it may be with **boldness**, as it was with Peter who proclaimed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)

Here,again, it may with be with **hesitation and doubt**, as it seems to have been with Thomas who, told about the Lord’s resurrection appearance when he wasn’t present, firmly declared, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand in His side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25).

And it may be with **shallow enthusiasm**, as it was with these men who, clearly, had been impressed by Jesus, and yet equivocated when it came to actually giving up what was dear to them to follow Him.

What is clear, when we stop and think about it, is that these two men couldn't bring themselves to make a clean break. It is as if they were saying, "I will….but there is something holding me back."…."I will, but something else has priority."

"Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to (Jesus), 'Lord, I will follow you wherever you go.' And He said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head.'

Then He said to another, ‘Follow me.’ But he said ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.’

And another said, ‘I will follow you, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.’ But Jesus said, ‘No one, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’”

Jesus wasn’t asking people to follow Him personally and as a man. What He wanted people to follow was the way of life He taught. And to find out what is the way of life He taught we need only go back into Matthew’s Gospel, the Chapters 5 to 7, to what is called “The Sermon on the Mount”.

Here, in The Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5-7) Jesus taught us, amongst other things:

- how to have deep, lasting, happiness (Chapter 5:2-11)
- our need to look within ourselves for sin, not just on the outside (Chapter 5:21-26)
- the sacredness of marriage (Chapter 5:31,32)
- the importance of doing good to please God and not just for display and so as to be thought a good and admirable person (Chapter 6:1-4)
- how to pray (Chapter 6: 5 to 13)
- how vital it is to forgive (Chapter 6:14 & 15)
- to focus on spiritual things, not on material, worldly things (Chapter 6:19-21)
- the need to live in the present and stop worrying about the future (Chapter 6:25-34)

And, what sums up this way of life Jesus taught us is, what has become known as "The "Golden Rule", "Whatever you want (others) to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (Chapter 7:12)

From the "Arcana Caelestia" we read, "Unless faith is implanted in love, that is, unless a person by means of the things of faith receives the life of faith, which is charity, having a joining of our lives with the Lord is impossible. This alone is what 'to follow Him', implies, namely to be joined to the Lord.' (paragraph 1737)

So, there is much more to following the Lord than what we might at first imagine. Faith doesn't become implanted in our lives without temptation because there is resistance from within us to

And so, we all need to ask ourselves, Are we ready for this? Or do we respond with uncertainty and with an inability to make a clean break? This is what is meant by these two men wanting to go back home first before following the Lord. They were not able to make a clean break. It is not that the Lord lacked sympathy, as some people, just reading the literal sense, have thought. But even on a natural level He wanted these men to know that they must be prepared for pain and self-sacrifice if they were to become His followers. And this remains so, two thousand years since! There will be pain; and self-sacrifice comes into it! Are you ready for this?

The two would-be followers of the Lord offered two reasons why they couldn't immediately go

The first man, remember, wanted to go back home and bury his father. Spiritually, wanting to go back and bury his father, means an as-yet to be overcome feeling for “dead” things.

For example, even if it is in secret, the would-be follower of the Lord still feels, and hankers for, the delight in criticizing people because it makes him (or her) feel superior to others.

Another example: we know that all good is from the Lord alone, but the would-be follower cannot quite give up wanting recognition and praise and is (still) inclined to be offended when it is not forthcoming.

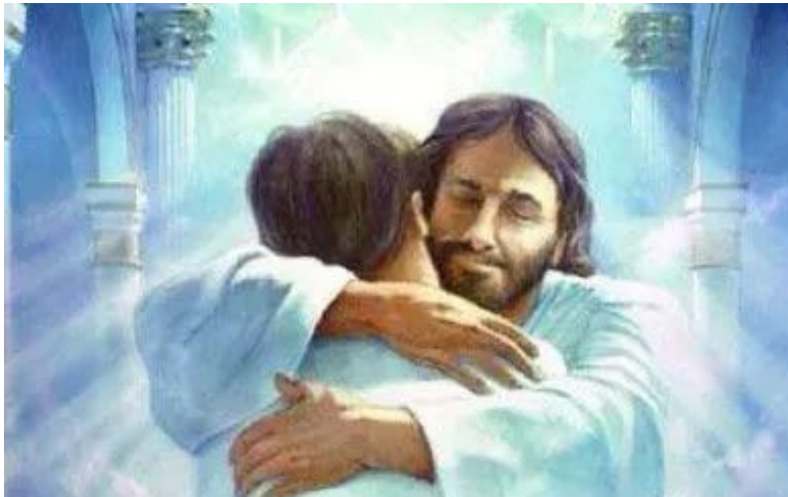
The other man told Jesus that he wanted to return home and bid farewell to those who were at his house. The spiritual sense here is the would-be follower of the Lord still wanting to nurture old relationships with what has been natural and unregenerate states. Up to this point the world-be follower of the Lord has thought of him or her-self as being in charge of his(her) own life and can be unwilling to accept a wholehearted submission to the Lord and His ways. (See Arcana Caelestia 6138)

"Whoever desires to come after Me," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow Me. Whoever desires to save their soul will lose it; but whoever lose their soul for My sake and the Gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:34,35)

So, too, what Jesus said, “You cannot serve to masters” (Matthew 6:24). Trying to do so is having put our hand to the plough, we turn and look back. And as any farmer will tell you, if you turn back from steadfastly looking forward you will soon find the plough zig-zagging all over the field.

With all of us there are all kinds of unregenerate and natural delights and fascinations, fears, regrets and mental constructs, we look back to, reluctant to give up and turn away from.

But time and again, as here, the Lord urges us to steadfastly and resolutely turn from these and go forward to all that He yearns to bless our lives with.



“Do not labour”, He said, “for the food that perishes.” (John 6:27). The food that perishes is these old, essentially unregenerate, delights, attitudes and outlooks on life on all of which we are too inclined to rely. We draw on them to nourish and sustain us. We feed too readily on the assumed shortcomings of others. We find a bizarre strength in the unregenerate fantasies we have about ourselves. “Do not labour for the food that perishes!” Rather, as the Lord goes on to say, “Labour for the food that endures unto everlasting life.” In other words, feed and grow strong on the life, the love, and the true ways of seeing ourselves, of seeing others, of understanding our purpose in the world, all of this coming from our unqualified response to the Lord’s wonderful invitation, coming down to us through the centuries, “Follow me.”

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Amen

Readings:

Psalm 63: verses 1 to 8

Luke Chapter 9: verses 57 to 62

Apocalypse Explained 864:6

"To follow the Lord us to be led by Him and not by oneself; and no other can be led by the Lord except him who is not led by himself. Every ones led by himself who does not shun evils because they are opposed to the Word, and thus to God: consequently, because they are sins and from hell.

Everyone who does not shun and turn away from evils is led of himself.

But it is otherwise when evils are removed, which is effected when they are shunned because they are infernal. Then the Lord enters with truths and goods from heaven and leads the person."

Secrets of Heaven 8495:4

In the case of those who are led by the Lord everything flows in, down to the smallest particle of life in both their understanding and their will, this down to every single part of the faith and charity that they possess.”

THE END