

Why aren't men following Jesus?

Mark 1, Luke 5, Luke 8, Matthew 14

I've got a friend called James. And when we were at uni together, a few of us tried to share our faith in Jesus with him, hoping that he would want to know Jesus too. James was always willing to have the chats, he came to an Alpha course, he came to church with us a few times.

And I remember having this conversation with him one day after a church service:

'So James... what do you make of it all, then?'

'Aye... well... I think it's probably all true.'

'So... what's stopping you, you know, going for it? Deciding to follow Jesus?'

'I just can't picture it... you know, me *praying*, reading my Bible - I just can't see myself doing it.'

And I remember having coffee with another friend of mine much more recently, and he doesn't go to church, but his family do. And, speaking about a friend of his who was just the same, he said - 'I must chat to him about that... why *don't* we go to church?'

They are just two of the guys I've come across who just can't picture their lives as men with a life of knowing and worshipping Jesus. And, with half the women not here as they have their women's weekend away, I thought I'd ask us the question...

Why aren't men following Jesus?

I deliberately ask 'why aren't men following Jesus?' rather than 'why do men hate going to church?' Because actually, men are coming to church. At least, you're coming to this church! But why is it women and children who 'get it' about Jesus first, and are so much quicker to drop everything to actually *follow* Jesus than men are?

And I've heard lots of reasons suggested for why the way our churches do things (including our church) just doesn't suit men. 'Messy church' that's all arts and crafts and glitter. Oh, the disdain of the glitter... Getting together for a chinwag with a cuppa after the service. Songs and sermons that search hearts and emotions and get us thinking about needing to depend on God. Talking about 'loving' Jesus and 'needing' Jesus...

All of that stuff just has more to do with the ladies and the weans, right? It's not very... blokey. If we made church less chat-chat-chat and more getting stuck in to something practical, and sharing a few words side to side instead of having big conversations face to face; if we encourage blokes to hang out at the back and not feel they have to get too involved, *then* we'll see more guys coming to faith and sticking around church... right?

What I've had in mind the last few weeks is what happened when Jesus arrived and called people to follow Him. And as I looked at four passages about Jesus and the *men* He first called to follow Him, what I saw was that all of that stuff - how we do our services and how we could tweak it to be more bloke-friendly - there might be something to it, but honestly, it's pretty cosmetic and superficial.

There's something deeper about what Jesus has to say to men that we need to hear. We'll look at these four encounters Jesus has around water and boats with the blokes He first discipled. The first is in Mark 1:14-20...

Read Mark 1:14-20

'Come, follow me!' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of women and children!' That's not what Jesus called out on that beach, is it? And whilst the gender-inclusive language that gets used in most of our hymn books and modern translations rightly tell us that Jesus is really saying 'people' in the widest way, isn't it a strange thing that men like the friends I told you about at the start can't picture themselves in that?

Jesus was calling four *men* on that beach. Who in turn went and called many more women, children - and *men*. And the thing is, these men came when they were called. And everything about it is decisive and immediate. v.18, 'At *once* they let their nets and followed Him. v.20, '*Without delay* He called them...and they... followed Him.'

Now, all of this follows the really simple message that they've heard Jesus proclaim to them and the whole town - 'The time has come! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent and believe the good news!'

The word 'time' in the Greek in which Mark is written is *kairos*. It's not like the passing of time, as in, 'what's the time? Oh, 11.10 already?' That's *chronos*. *Kairos* refers to a moment in time, a thing breaking in and bringing change and opportunity. It's something to be seized, now, and not allowed to slip away.

Jesus says, 'the moment in time has come! With my arrival comes the Kingdom of God. Be part of it. Seize that opportunity that is there before you, *now*. It's available and it's urgent and it matters *now*.'

For better or worse, most guys I know are pretty decisive. We make up our minds and that's that, pretty quickly. Sometimes, that leads to things going really badly! Sometimes, that leads to things going really well. The thing that Jesus is calling men to believe is that decisively making a call to follow Him is the best call you can make, whether you know much about what that will look like or not.

(All this is fine, it's got the attention of the blokes, who are always up for hearing a challenge... it's the next bit that Jesus says that makes them deaf and wander back to the golf course...)

'*Repent*, and believe the good news!' Repent. What does that mean? Well, as I've preached so many times here, it pretty simply means, 'Change your mind.'

Of course, there's nothing simple about a bloke changing his mind. We're stubborn. We can't imagine changing our thinking or living, lining up with being shown a new way as if someone else knows better than us. Even if the person showing us that is the Son of God. Now, you might say that's true of plenty of women you know too. And I know a lot of parents who could wax lyrical about how vocally stubborn their kids are.

But here's the thing - in my experience, many more women and children are willing to be led a new way, and to be led in that by Jesus. How many of you men are consciously acting on what Jesus says here? 'Repent - think and live differently, according to what I show you?' And how many of you, if you're honest, are pretty set in your ways? Your patterns of thought, your beliefs, your priorities, your lifestyles?

Men need to learn to repent. Change your mind, your thinking, line it up a new way according to what you see and learn of Jesus. And they need to hear that as an always urgent, immediate call. Something to be decisive about. Not a process to slowly mull over in a period of months or years. Jesus said to these fishermen, 'Come with me, come now! Now's the moment, no delays!'

What's the last significant thing that you changed your mind about? How quickly did you act on that?

Read Luke 5:1-11

Jesus kind of barges his way in to Simon Peter's life. Simon's just getting on with his day job - washing his fisherman's nets - when Jesus jumps, uninvited, into his boat. He's just there in Simon's workplace, making Himself heard. And He starts telling Simon what to do. 'Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.'

Now, as Simon explains, he's just done this, and it didn't work. There's nothing there. But crucially, he obeys. He decides to do what Jesus tells him to. 'But because you say so, I will let down the nets.'

How many blokes would have said, 'Er, no. And get out of my boat. Get out of my office. Get out of my shop. Get out of my van. I didn't ask you here!' The thing is, Simon obeys what this upstart Jesus, who presumes to put Himself in charge, says.

And thank God he did. Because what Simon experienced was the most astonishing catch of fish. So much blessing, it was too much for him - the nets were about to break with it. It was a picture of fullness and abundance and provision that Jesus brings when you let Him in and let Him lead.

It's a fullness and blessing that causes Simon to get down on his knees and say, 'Wow, okay, Jesus - I can't be in your presence, I'm a sinful man. If you knew me... if you knew the things I've done, said, thought... you wouldn't want to be in my boat, giving me all this goodness.'

There's a fear in Simon. He's discovering that there is a God, and He's right in Simon's face now, and that's more than unnerving for him. As Simon goes through that experience, Jesus speaks quickly into it - 'Don't be afraid; from now on, you will catch men.' Jesus reassures Simon that He chooses him, wants him, and has a purpose and a role for him. God's barging into Simon's life with purpose. Saving him, and using Simon to help save others.

Men need to learn to obey Jesus. Because that's where it all starts. An unassuming, didn't-see-what-was-coming-next obedience to what Jesus said, even though it didn't make sense, is what led to Peter going through these deep things of being surprisingly filled, deeply unsettled, and then totally secured in the presence of the Almighty God.

It starts when men listen to what Jesus says, and do it. There's a very simple practical way to do this - open your bibles. I'm tired of hearing men say, 'I'm not a big reader, myself...'

No wonder women and children are experiencing more of that big stuff than men are. They're opening their bibles and reading them. Listening to what Jesus says, and when they choose to line their lives up with it, getting deeply transformed by it.

If you want help getting into God's Word, guys, tell me - we'll find a way to get you in there. But don't kid yourselves that you're living in obedience to Jesus if you're pretty comfortably not listening to His words to you day by day.

There's another way that men learn to obey Jesus and shape their lives around that - and it's by the role models we have. I think part of my friends' problem was that they didn't have men in their lives who showed them what listening to and obeying the lead of Jesus looked like. So they couldn't picture doing it, because they hadn't any picture of it to refer to.

Time and again, Jesus tells His disciples to 'do as I have done' and Paul tells other guys to 'imitate me, and put into practice what you see in other guys that I've shown how to follow Jesus.' Men need role models of obedience to Jesus as much as women and children do. They are in shorter supply though.

Right now, next door, four men are being role models to the boys in in our kids groups. I pray that the boys in this church, and the girls too, grow up with plenty of understanding of what obeying Jesus looks like and why it's brilliant, because they see that in the men and women in this church family choosing to follow Jesus like this day by day.

Who are the men in your life that have shown you how to obey Jesus and how that brings the fullest blessings?

So, men need to learn to repent. Men need to learn to obey. A little later on in Luke 8, we learn that *men need to learn to shout for help*.

Read Luke 8:22-25

The men in that boat were terrified. That didn't happen easily. They were tough, weather-beaten, experienced fishermen. They had seen their fair

share of storms on the lake, and knew how to handle them. This storm, though, was so big that even they couldn't handle it. They were scared. And when the chips were really down, even in front of their mates, nothing stopped them calling out to Jesus.

I've often wondered whether the thing about men and Jesus is this: The good news about Jesus is really about being rescued. But men don't think they need rescued. Or else they don't want to admit that they do. They don't want to admit that to their friends, their families... to themselves.

Talk to Scott McBride about some of the calls he's been on in the Fire & Rescue service, though, and he'll tell you that men scream for help as much as anyone else when they see the danger they're in. Talk to David Murray about serving as a soldier on the frontline, and he'll tell you that in real danger, men will call out for a rescue - and that includes prayer.

It's time for men to realise that they're in danger. We live in a time and a place where male mental health is a massive issue. Where, in the Highlands, there is a frightening rate of male suicides. And I know that for some of us, that's not just statistics to be worried about; that's men that you've known and loved.

Mikeysline and the Hive Project, running from Academy Street, was set up in response to this. They work to help all people, not just men, who want someone to talk to about not being okay. And that's great work, people committing themselves to support and help other people, something that we want to cheer on and support as God's people. But we want to say something more as a church about how *God* wants to help those who aren't okay.

There is hope for hopeless men, in Jesus. There is rescue for men who will admit that they need it, in Jesus. He transforms lives. Still today, He brings light to darkness; He lifts men out of addiction to everything from drugs to porn to work to exercise to drink to violence to image to debt. He lifts the massive weight of expectation and self-image off of men's minds and gives them a focus on Jesus instead.

He lifts men out of sin and gives us innocence, freshness and eternal life. He helps us to stop puffing our chests out to make ourselves as big and hard and impressive as we can, and gives us love - yes, *love*, that's not just for the women and the weans, we *all* need that - and all of that is gifted to men by God through Jesus. He rescues men. When we finally ask Him to.

Do you see what Jesus' response to the fishermen was when they did call out to Him? He stills the storm. Makes them realise they're not sinking, and they were never going to, because Jesus was with them the whole time. And He says, 'Where is your faith?'

The men were afraid, and finally admitted it. They had fear. And Jesus presents faith as if it's something to have *instead* of fear. This is what happens in most of the passages we've looked at today. Where there's fear inside, Jesus speaks of faith in Him being the contrast, the antidote, the other way.

The men in that boat heard Jesus speak of faith in Him, but respond with more fear, in v.25. 'Who is this?' They don't get it yet. They haven't yet put their faith in Jesus. In who He is. In what He can do. It's not until the next chapter that Peter gets it, and says it out loud - 'You are the Christ. The King and Rescuer. The One to bow to and obey, and the One to cry out to and be saved by.'

Men are afraid. Whatever their faces say. It comes out in all sorts of ways - outbursts of anger. Doing things to numb the fear. Bottling it up. And tragically, sometimes ending it all. Men need to know that Jesus says to fearful guys, 'Putting faith in me deals with your fear by *replacing* it.' Fear might still sit in the car. But it doesn't get to drive anymore. It's faith in Jesus that takes the wheel and sets the course now.

What are you afraid of? How does faith in Jesus change things?

So from these stories of the first men following Jesus, we've seen that men need to change their minds. They need to obey. And they need to cry out for help, specifically to Jesus. Three things that don't come easily to men, but that God calls and challenges us to do. And to do all of that involves something else God calls us to - *men need to learn to take the risks that Jesus calls us to.*

There is an image about faith in Jesus life in church that it's all about being warm and snug. It's all about 'God, keep me safe; help us to look after each other really well; and make everything as comfy as possible, please.'

But Jesus said, 'Follow me. And if you do, you'll be risk-takers. You'll get heckled, spat at and misunderstood. I'll call you to things that stretch you greatly - sacrifice, generosity, bold speech, courageous advocacy against

injustice. It won't be comfy. But you'll also see Heaven breaking into Earth, lives changed, impossible things happen, and by the way, you'll see eternity. It'll be the adventure of a lifetime, and more.'

Men need to know that the biggest adventures, the greatest risks with the greatest rewards, the richest life with the greatest fullness, comes from following Jesus. As Peter discovered in the passage we read earlier in Matthew 14:22-33.

It starts with 'immediately.' Again, everything Jesus does with these guys is decisive, urgent and purposeful. And as they experience another storm on the lake, Jesus walks out on the water towards them. Again we see the contrast of faith and fear. When they cry out in fear, Jesus calls quickly to tell them not to be afraid.

And Peter decides to take a risk on Jesus. 'Okay Jesus... call me, and I'll walk to you on the water.' It's bold. It's kind of crazy, really. But Jesus says, 'Okay. Come...' He invites Peter to do the bold, crazy, faith-filled, risk-taking thing. And what an incredible experience for Peter. He actually *walked on water*. Something he would have missed out on if he didn't boldly take the risk at Jesus' invitation.

Now I'm not suggesting to the men or anyone else that you should head off to Loch Ness ready for a stroll across it. Peter put something out there to Jesus, and got a clear invitation from Jesus to go for it. What I wonder is, whether the men in particular, are hearing a clear invitation from Jesus to 'go for it,' and you're holding back... and you're missing out... on the incredible things Jesus has for you.

Whether that is the invitation from Jesus, 'Come, follow me' that you've heard dozens of times now, or for the first time today, and you're *still* holding back from it... or it's something specific that Jesus has invited you to give to or pray for or pursue... don't hold back from taking the risk Jesus invites you to take. You might never know what you're missing out on.

And when you do go for it, as Peter did, that hidden enemy that men don't admit to called fear sneaks up again. Peter became afraid and started to sink. To be honest, I felt like that this week. I became afraid. Of all the things I saw surrounding me. And 'sinking' is exactly how I felt. I'd taken my eyes off Jesus, and off the adventurous path He called me to walk.

And to that, He said to Peter, and He said to me this week, 'You of little faith... why did you doubt?' And I'm going to finish by leaving that question in the mind of every man, and every woman, listening to this. Because I don't think Jesus is asking Peter, or you, a rhetorical question here. What, actually, is your answer, to the God, the King, the Rescuer, Jesus, who calls you to risk everything on Him, and asks with it...

'You of little faith... why did you doubt?'