



‘Joining the Road’

Rod Harding - July 18, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Romans 3:9-26

It’s hard to think about ‘joining the road’ without imagining a road journey to somewhere – anywhere – even if it’s just to go to Woolies for the groceries. Whenever we set off from home, in the car, on the bike, or even on foot, we are ‘joining the road’, and hoping that those with whom we share it will be careful and abide by the rules (as we do, of course!).

Nine years ago, on her birthday, I took Glenys on a road trip – Sutherland to Berrima, then around some of the highland’s waterfalls before lunch at Kangaroo Valley, back over Berry Mountain via Cambewarra lookout and up the coast through Kiama, Stanwell Park and home. I had also planned a surprise for her – towards the end of the trip, at the lookout at Stanwell Tops, I proposed – and she accepted. We were on a road trip, and that day we joined a shared road, which we are still on together.

Being ‘on the road’ is, of course, also a metaphor for doing life – life is a journey, and as we travel along the road, we walk (or drive, or ride ...) sometimes alone, sometimes with others, doing long parts of the journey with just a few (like family), but making contact and enjoying (or sometimes not enjoying) the company of many others as the road twists and turns through our experiences of life.

Today we begin a sermon series which will take us through the school term which has begun this week, to the end of September, in the middle of the next school holidays. There are eleven topics in this series on discipleship, working our way through under the heading, ‘Walking with Jesus – the Road of Discipleship’. It’ll be a little like a road trip together, stopping off week by week to think about, and be challenged by, different aspects of the discipleship journey, as we move along this road together.

But don’t miss the real point of the title – it’s not just us on this road, but rather, it’s about ‘walking with Jesus’ as we journey. When Jesus

commissioned his first disciples to this ‘road’ he was very specific – *go and make disciples ... baptising them ... and teaching them ... and surely I am with you always.*” (Matt 28:19-20). When you are on this road, Jesus said, you do not travel on your own – I am with you! The road of discipleship is the road walked with Jesus – on this road, he cannot be avoided, ignored, left behind or overtaken – he has promised – *‘I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’* (Even beyond the end of September!)

But you don’t start the road trip without getting ready – you need to put your things in the car, ensure the tank is full (or, for early responders, the battery is fully charged), and have some idea of where you are headed, before you join the road. Jesus himself warned the crowds who were following him,

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’” (Luke 14:26-39)

In other words, consider what this road of discipleship will cost you, don’t just jump in and then be taken by surprise and want to jump out. Jesus’ words provide considerable food for thought – note that he’s not really expecting his followers to hate every member of their family, but he is saying, and even emphasising, that we have to know that if we commit to being Jesus’ disciples, we must be prepared to follow him, even if our closest family members don’t like it, and perhaps even reject us because we do. The clear indication is that this is not necessarily an easy, or comfortable, or always pleasant road to travel, that Jesus calls his followers to tough times as well as good times, and that there is no guarantee that the path will always be smooth, the views always spectacular, or the stop-overs always five-star – sometimes the going

will get really tough, and call for determination, courage and resilience in the face of significant opposition. Remember it was like that for Jesus himself, so we shouldn't expect anything else – that's why he told his friends, *'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.'* (John 15:20).

I'm not saying any of this to scare anyone, or to put you off – most of you are already very familiar with the practical reality of what I'm saying. The Christian life can sometimes be a struggle, we are often engaged in tough conversations, we are accused of narrow-mindedness or fundamentalism, our moral and religious beliefs are regarded as being out-dated and therefore irrelevant, and there are no longer many who want to be bothered with listening to what the Christian voice is saying to our secular culture and world. So we are persecuted – perhaps no longer burnt at the stake or placed in the stocks, but certainly mocked and discouraged at every opportunity. And if all that is even vaguely, or only partly, true, why would anyone want to join this road?

I heard a story, just this last week, of a young man who grew up as a son of a clergyman – a 'PK' like me, and I'm not the only one in our church. Only this guy, as a kid, became literally traumatised by the imagery he heard so often from the church about sin and judgement, about God's anger towards those who disobey, about hell, punishment, death and destruction. He felt he could not identify at all with such a god, and his only way of coping was to reject all notions of any god – so now, as a young man, his life is heading in any direction but the 'road of discipleship', even though he clearly has a heart to help and support others.

I don't want to go soft on people's rejection of God, or on how serious is the brokenness of people in our world, our society, our community and yes, even our church, including you and me – but escaping from judgement, or wanting to take out a life insurance policy in the face of impending death, are not really good reasons for 'joining the road'. Having said that, I know there are always some who come to God that way – and I'd love to hear your story, if that is you – but I feel more strongly for the young man who went the other way, and I don't want to

be responsible for either bashing people into the kingdom, or turning them against it.

When I read the gospels, I see Jesus calling those who would become his disciples to follow him. The one clear reason that he gave them (especially to those who were fishermen) was that he would teach them to ‘fish for people’ (Matt 4:19). This sounds more to me like a positive motivation, rather than a negative one. Time and time again, we see Jesus interacting with ungodly people in positive ways – not in a condemnatory fashion – such that he was accused of being ‘*a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners*’ (Matt 11:19). He stood up for the woman caught in adultery, and rescued her from the angry ‘righteous’ crowd, led by the Pharisees and teachers of the law, without rejecting or accusing her, saying, ‘*Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.*’ (John 8:11). He told the story of a compassionate father graciously welcoming home his rebellious son, without any hint of criticism or accusation. It is clear he did not tolerate ungodly behaviour, but he constantly showed grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness, rather than pointing the finger and accusing people of their disobedience and unrighteousness.

Jesus’ personal ministry to so many accurately reflects Jeremiah’s prophetic insight into the heart of God, as we read in Jeremiah 31.

‘I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel ... not like the covenant I made with their ancestors because they broke my covenant ... This is the covenant I will make ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ (Jer 31:31-33)

God’s plan was for positive transformation – a renewed mind and heart, in response to God’s unfailing love and faithfulness to his promise. In spite of their broken commitments, and their constant inability to keep their side of the bargain, God reaffirms that he will renew his covenant with his people in a way that it will be impossible to mistake – ‘*I will be their God, and they will be my people.*’

It is this heart of God, his compassion for those who are lost, and his desire to see more people respond to his gracious invitation, which lies

behind the Apostle Paul's words in Romans, as he carefully, historically and theologically outlines the gospel to his readers in Rome (and in Kiama). It was so true that God's people, the Jews, were no better off than the Gentiles (those who were not God's people) – they were all tarred with the same brush – all rejecting God and being cut off from him as a result. Any advantage that the Israelites might have once had no longer existed – but now the new covenant was defined under the terms of the original promise to Abraham – inclusion and blessing for all nations and peoples.

And so Paul was able to write,

'This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile ... all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.' (Rom 3:22-24)

To this we must pay close attention, because here is the crux of the matter. Without Jesus and all he has done through his '*sacrifice of atonement ... the shedding of his blood*' (Rom 3:25), there is no possibility for us to join the road.

It is God himself who offers the invitation to all people to join the road, based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who by his undeserved death has taken the penalty (of death) that we (and all people) do deserve, because of our natural tendency towards either ignorance or deliberate rebellion against God. The invitation is '*to be received by faith*.' It is as we trust God and take him at his word, as we understand all Jesus claimed to be and do, that we realise we must not miss this road trip, because only on this road can we walk together with Jesus, and he is ultimately the only one who is able to fulfil his promise of forgiveness and life to all who come to him in faith. So, letting go of any claim to our own ability to make things right for ourselves, we simply let Jesus do what he does best – accept us as we are, forgive us for who we've been, and allow his Spirit to live in us, ever changing us to be more like him as we walk together on the road.

Towards the end of the 'discipleship manifesto' in Matthew 5 – 7 (the sermon on the mount), Jesus describes two roads, familiar to most of us,

and very important for all of us. They are the wide and narrow roads of Matthew 7:13,14:

‘Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.’

I would like to finish with an excerpt from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, ‘The Cost of Discipleship’ (with apologies to Men’s Secret Business – but this bit of business is too good to keep secret).

‘The path of discipleship is narrow, and it is fatally easy to miss one’s way and stray from the path, even after years of discipleship. And it is hard to find. On either side of the narrow path deep chasms yawn. To be called to a life of extraordinary quality, to live up to it, and yet to be unconscious of it is indeed a narrow way. To confess and testify to the truth as it is in Jesus, and at the same time to love the enemies of that truth, his enemies and ours, to love them with the infinite love of Jesus Christ, is indeed a narrow way. To believe the promise of Jesus that his followers shall possess the earth, and at the same time to face our enemies unarmed and defenceless, preferring to incur injustice rather than to do wrong ourselves, is indeed a narrow way. To see the weakness and wrong in others, and at the same time refrain from judging them; to deliver the gospel message without casting pearls before swine, is indeed a narrow way. The way is unutterably hard, and at every moment we are in danger of straying from it. If we regard this way as one we follow in obedience to an external command, if we are afraid of ourselves all the time, it is indeed an impossible way. But if we behold Jesus Christ going on before step by step, we shall not go astray. If we worry about the dangers that beset us, if we gaze at the road instead of at him who goes before, we are already straying from the path. For he is himself the way, the narrow way and the strait gate. He, and he alone, is our journey’s end.’

What a road and what an end! Come on – let’s get on the road together!

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ *“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.*

³² *It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the Lord.*

³³ *“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.*

*“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.*

³⁴ *No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.*

*“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”*

Romans 3:9-26

⁹ *What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all!
For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are
all under the power of sin. ¹⁰ As it is written:*

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ *there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.*

¹² *All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;*

*there is no one who does good,
not even one.”*

¹³ *“Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”*

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

¹⁴ *“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”*

¹⁵ *“Their feet are swift to shed blood;*

¹⁶ *ruin and misery mark their ways,*

¹⁷ *and the way of peace they do not know.”*

¹⁸ *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

¹⁹ *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

²¹ *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

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