Read Matthew 28: 16-20

Introduction
In the days of sail, when wind-powered warships from England, France and Spain patrolled their respective territories, the flying of one’s national flag, one’s ‘colours’ as it is called, was of supreme importance, especially in time of war. Not only do the colours identify your nationality, the sight of one’s ‘colours’ defiantly flying from the masthead indicated you were ready to engage the enemy and fight. Legally, ships were only permitted to fight while their colours were being flown. Striking or taking down the ship’s colours was recognised as a sign of surrender.

Now, to remove all possibility of his crew throwing in the towel, of surrendering during the heat of battle, the captain might choose to have his ship’s colours nailed to the mast. That way they couldn’t be taken down. That way the ship’s crew couldn’t surrender.

Show image
Should the ship’s company, the crew, choose to nail the colours to the mast, they would be making a clear statement to their captain. “We will not fail you.” “Do or die,” as British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson is wont to say, “Do or die, we shall never surrender.” Nailing one’s colours to the mast; loyal to the end.

In baptism the follower of Jesus Christ nails his or her colours to the mast. In baptism the believer is declaring absolute loyalty to Jesus Christ, no matter the cost. That loyalty is seen in two major areas of Christian life – sharing Jesus and obeying Jesus.
Sharing Jesus

Jesus’ call for Christians everywhere is that they live out their Christian faith and make it visible. And that can be a scary thing to do, but it is vital that Christian faith is seen, defiantly flying from the mast-head. You see, Christian faith is not a private affair. Faith is deeply personal, to be sure, but never private. Christian faith includes the mission of God, which is sharing Jesus - making the good news of Jesus Christ known to the people we meet. And that can be scary, embarrassing, even risky. Yet, if the Christian believer is to be loyal to Jesus, he or she will be ready, as opportunities present themselves, to speak of their Saviour and the new life they have come to know. Nailing one’s colours to the mast means sharing Jesus. It is urgent that we do so.

The truth is, until men and women receive the life and forgiveness that God offers, until we turn in faith to Jesus his Son, we are lost and without hope – without hope in this world, without any hope in the next. The Christian message is therefore a life-and-death message. Only in Jesus Christ are we made to share in God’s never-ending life. In sharing Jesus the Christian is sharing eternal life and hope. It is imperative that we do so.

Yet, against all logic, this Christian message is an unpopular message. It is unpopular because it requires of people that they admit their wrong-doing and their desperate need of forgiveness. Human pride is seldom ready to do this. Sharing Jesus may, therefore, result in people thinking the Christian believer is weird or intolerant or arrogant. It may cost a friendship. In some countries it may cost your life. But Jesus calls the believer to do it anyway.

Yet, in asking his followers to nail their colours to the mast, Jesus is not asking that we do more than he has already done for us. For Jesus, in his great love, gave up everything for lost humanity. He gave up his life. On a cruel cross he suffered and died for our sins. The innocent Son of God died for the sin of a hateful world. And God his Father raised him back to life to conclusively demonstrate that Jesus has conquered sin and the grave. Jesus has given everything for us. By his atoning death and resurrection, he has opened the way for a sinner like me to receive God’s mercy and life. And now Jesus calls those who own his name to follow him, faithfully, loyally, no matter the cost. Part of that faithful following means sharing the good news of Jesus.
Please don’t misunderstand me, though. By ‘sharing Jesus’, I am not talking of bible-bashing the first person we come across. Neither am I talking of judging anyone. The Christian is in no place to judge. There is nothing in the Christian that has commended him or her to God. Brian is forgiven; I am forgiven and accepted by God not because of any good in me. God accepts us when we turn to him because of what Jesus has done for us, and because God is gracious. No bible-bashing, no judgment, just love. That is the acceptable motivation.

Someone has said that our sharing Jesus Christ is like one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. All humanity stands in desperate need of God’s mercy and love. When someone discovers that mercy and love, why would they not point out where that bread may be found?

Nailing our colours to the mast means publicly sharing Jesus. It also means obedience; obeying Jesus as Lord. This too can be costly.

**Obeying Jesus**

I have never served in the armed forces. I did, though, work alongside some ex-service personnel from the Navy during my time with the Auckland Harbour Board. It was largely an enjoyable experience. I was told early on of the two important rules of navy life young Able Seamen are quickly introduced to. “If it moves, salute it. If it’s standing still, paint it.”

Ex-servicemen and women have a certain manner about them. They are generally recognisable for being smartly groomed, having good posture, for being respectful and for carrying out their given tasks in an efficient sort of way. Orders from their captain are to be obeyed, even when the instructions seems unreasonable.

The Christian Church has a Captain; Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus, who came to earth as a man and gave up everything for us. This Captain, this Jesus calls Christian believers to follow him. To follow Jesus means to model our lives on his life; to imitate him. To follow Jesus means to obey him. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” (Jn 14:15) The Christian, in nailing his colours to the mast in baptism, declares to the world, “I will follow and obey Jesus no matter the cost.”
What was the priority of Jesus’ earthly life? It was doing the will of God his Father. Jesus was fully God but he was also fully man, like us. And, we are told, as a human being he learned obedience. Jesus’ entire life is a glorious demonstration of what perfect obedience to the will of God looks like. We have a record of that life recorded in the New Testament. It is a lovely life, full of grace and truth. Jesus calls Christian believers to model their lives on his life. He calls Christian believers to obedience. What does it mean to imitate and obey Jesus? Two areas of Christian life can briefly be mentioned.

To obey Jesus means, firstly, that we love.

**Love**

One day Jesus had a theological question put to him. “Teacher,” he was asked, “What is the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses?” Jesus replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments,” he said. (Matt 22:36-40)

The Christian is commanded to love. This is our number one marching-order. Love God with every fibre of our being. And also, love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Jesus went on to teach and show by example after example that love is not an emotion but a kindly, costly action. Love of God is shown in delightful worship and obedience. Love of neighbour through giving generously to one who is in need; through showing compassion to one who is hurting or lonely or ostracised; through forgiving the person who has hurt you; through reaching out across cultural, social and other divides with God’s grace. Love is a kindly action. And love is costly. Jesus’ love took him to the cross. Where will the love of God take us? Love is an action. We are commanded to love.

To obey Jesus means, secondly, that we deny ourselves.

**Self Denial**

On another occasion, Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said to them, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take
up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mk 8:34, 35)

Denying ourselves anything today is generally considered to be unhealthy. “Give in to your desires, whatever they might be” - this seems to be the modern mantra. But Jesus presents his potential followers with another life principle, a mandated kingdom-of-God principle – denial of self. If anyone would come after me, he or she must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. To take up one’s cross means being prepared to give up everything, even our lives if necessary, for the sake of Christ.

Let go the baggage of this materialistic age that so dominates your life, Jesus tells us. Give up the distorted notion that your wants and desires take first place. Stop making personal success, personal security and comfort the focus of life. This is not how life in the kingdom of God operates. Life in God’s kingdom has the will of God as the priority and not personal ambition.

The follower of Jesus learns to maintain a loose hold on material things while keeping his heart ever open to whatever Jesus calls him to do, wherever Jesus directs her to go. There is a cost to following Jesus – make no mistake. But the Christian will not count the cost. Rather he will count it a privilege to follow in Jesus’ steps. And he or she will do so in the sure knowledge that God is faithful and will provide his children with the necessities of life as we serve him.

The Christian is called to travel light. The Christian is called to self-denial for the sake of Christ and the gospel. The Christian is called imitate Christ who gave everything for us.

For evangelical Christians baptism is that heroic act by which we make public our undying loyalty to Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit living in me, I will obey Christ; I will make known his life-saving gospel. Faith is no longer a private affair for me. In baptism I nail my Christian colours to the mast.

AMEN