

A while ago, in the Wednesday evening Bible study group, we watched a video made by Rob Bell, called Dust. It is part of his Nooma series, and I do recommend it.

Anyhow, it really set me thinking. Here's the background.

The educational system in Jesus' time was a religious one. Children attended the synagogue to learn the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, by heart. The aim was not academic or technical, but entirely God-centred, leading to the knowledge of the law and an understanding of how to live a righteous life.

The most able would stay on at 'secondary school', in which they would discuss and debate the Torah, the history of the Jewish people, and the oral law, the Mishnah, under the guidance of the teacher or Rabbi. Some of these debates were recorded in the Talmud.

The 'best of the best' would approach a Rabbi and ask to become a disciple. The Rabbi would test them on their knowledge and understanding, and, if they were satisfied that this person could indeed become a follower, and learn to be like himself, choose the 'best of the best'.

Being a disciple meant following your Rabbi wherever he went, as he walked and taught, learning from him, and earnestly endeavouring to be like him in every way. Hence the rather surprising benediction, 'may you be covered in the dust of your Rabbi'. Dust kicked up on the dry tracks of the Holy Land, covering the disciple as he walked as closely as he could, to his teacher.

Youngsters who left education at the end of elementary school, or after secondary school, those who didn't reach the 'best of the best' level, followed the occupation of their parents, home-making, agriculture, fishing, carpentry, and so on.

How wonderful it is to be chosen. I wonder how many people here shared my lack of enthusiasm for games at school. I was the one who hid in the changing rooms rather than running enthusiastically out onto the hockey pitch. In tennis, I saw the ball in my opponent's hand, saw the racquet raised to hit it, and next minute, inexplicably, it appeared behind me. When it came to choosing teams, leaders did their best to avoid including Fleur.

Now think about James and John, sons of Zebedee. They were fishermen, mending the nets. So not the best of the best. Probably not even the 'quite goods'. Definitely the 'not good enoughs'. But Jesus, the best Rabbi ever, comes up and says, come on, follow me, I want you to be my disciples. No hesitation: off they go!

What does Jesus expect of his disciples? He says that his is an easy yoke, but it looks pretty daunting to me. In Matthew 10, he outlines a few of the requirements: clearing out evil spirits, caring for the sick, the lost and confused, touching the untouchables, staying with strangers and accepting their hospitality, or moving on if unwelcome. And the dangers! Like sheep amongst wolves, coping with animosity and aggression. And be content to be treated as badly as Jesus himself!

Scary stuff! And yet, Jesus' disciples sign up for it. Peter, another 'not good enough' fisherman, is utterly devoted and utterly determined to follow exactly in Jesus' footsteps. When Jesus tells his disciples to set off in the boat without him, of course he obeys. When Jesus approaches them, walking nonchalantly on choppy waters, Peter is eager to do the same. He has entrusted his whole life to Jesus. Go for it Peter! He

can do it! He's actually walking on water! And then he sinks and yells for help. Jesus reproaches him. What a familiar phrase that is, 'oh ye of little faith'. And hauls him out of the water.

How do we understand this? Does Peter lose faith in Jesus, and overcome with fear, start to sink? Is he overcome by unbelief in Jesus' divinity or his power to save, and suffer the consequences? If we look at the life of Peter as described in the Bible, he is impetuous, silly, fearful, violent,... and utterly committed to Jesus. How can we believe that he lost faith in Jesus at that crucial moment? Surely not! After all, it is to Jesus that he calls out for help. I think he lost faith in himself. He doubts that he can possibly be a loveable, reliable, valued disciple.

How often had he been told that he was one of the 'not good enoughs'? How often had he been reminded that being a fisherman meant that no Rabbi would want to choose him? and now he is one of Jesus' chosen ones! How fantastic is that!

And how difficult to grasp and always keep at the forefront of **our** thoughts? We are chosen! Ball skills or no. Whatever horrible histories we carry with us, whatever awful regrets, whatever terrible wrongs which it is too late to right, we are still chosen! In this world we might be considered 'not good enough'. We may have decided that that is what we are, not good enough, trailing behind the true disciples, hoping for some crumb of comfort. Jesus counters that there is no doubt, we are chosen. Alleluia!

And what do we do with this extraordinary gift? Will we be required to walk on water? Well, Jesus has the answer. In Matthew 10:40-42 he says,

This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing."

And in John 13:34-35, he says,

"Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

Let's go for it!

Please pray with me, paraphrasing Rob Bell's words.

Lord let us recognise that God really believes in us. Give us faith in Jesus and trust that Jesus has true faith that we can be like him: a person of love and courage, compassion and truth, a person of forgiveness and peace, of grace and joy and hope. And may we be covered in the dust of our Rabbi, Jesus.

Amen.

**Fleur Pelly, 6 July 2025**