

Soul Spark: Session 2



Journey, tides and seasons

Jesus invitation to 'come and follow' can arouse various responses. It may excite us, affirm us, overwhelm us or cause us to become aware of our fears, anxieties and questions. Whatever the inner reactions, Jesus' words imply a journey, and a mysterious one at that. Is it a physical journey, an inner journey or both?

What does saying 'yes' to Jesus' invitation mean and where will it take us?

The journey of faith is one of trust and hope. Trusting that God will be present as we respond in faith, hoping that it will reveal its meaning and purpose. The mystery of this means the faith journey is never linear. It cannot be a straight line from A to B, constantly getting better and better. Jesus' journey was certainly not like that, the Gospel writers describe a convoluted geographical journey, an emotional rollercoaster, and one which brought its greatest challenges and deepest emotions near the end. Jesus' ministry began with profound teaching and wonderful ministry, but as it drew to a close faced great opposition and apparent total failure. The experience of many deeply faithful Christians does not contradict this. Many find their faith journeys are often rather messy and have periods which seem to be going nowhere. Not much 'getting there' or moving 'onwards and upwards', and yet so much preaching implies this!

Cyclical models of the faith journey can be far more helpful in making sense of its dynamics. David Adam in his book 'Tides and Seasons' explores how the movements and changes can helpfully be related to aspects of the spiritual life. Taking Jesus' invitation to consider the lilies of the field, a little further, to the seasons the lilies live through, we can see both Jesus' life and our life experiences relating to these cycles and movements.

The image of the tide ebbing creates a sense of those times when life feels it is diminishing, draining, or being exposed to harsh elements or growth and development is hidden. The flow tide brings times of life filling up, developments and growth, new energies and possibilities around and within us.

The four seasons of the year offer valuable images to help us appreciate every part of our journey. We can also look and parallel each season with the life of Jesus.

Spring helps us to recognise new growth, life and energy. Jesus' springtime was his early ministry, his calling and gathering of the disciples, the beginning of new teaching for the Jewish people.

Summer is a time of abundance and fullness of life where there is an easier and more relaxed feeling. Such a time for Jesus would have been the feeding of the 5,000, his disciples going out and coming back amazed at the power of God.

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Autumn helps to connect with the invitation to let go. Plants and trees let go of their leaves and prepare to draw back into the ground. For Jesus the time came to turn towards the cross, letting go of his earthly ministry.

Through **winter** we become aware of the seeming bareness of life. On the surface of landscapes not much appears to be happening and we can feel drawn into lesser life and energy, waiting for darkness to pass. This season can mirror Jesus' death and burial in the tomb.

Spring always follows winter, resurrection from the tomb; new life and hope visit again.

It is important to recognise the 'in-between time of death and resurrection, the place of waiting, the gap. Many on their faith journeys find they spend more time than they expect in this place. It is often uncomfortable and confusing, therefore it can be tempting to move onto the 'next thing', or if nothing is happening then to 'make it happen'. Our faith grows in the gap as we wait to see what emerges. This place calls us to trust that God is radically at work in the gap, drawing us to a greater sense of life and freedom even though there are no signs.

Each season has its value in faith and life. Things have to die to allow new growth.

Stepping out in faith

Our journey with God is a journey into new seasons that can take us into unfamiliar places. So faith is not about believing a set of religious principles it is about living by trust in something that is beyond certainty. We have a God who goes before us, beckoning and inviting us to follow and encounter him in mystery, to journey from the security of what we know into the beyond of growth and life.

Therefore the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty! The disciple Thomas (John 20:24-29) took the risk of daring to express his doubt. Doubt in this gospel story leads to a new and deeper encounter with Jesus. A desire and willingness to struggle and search can lead to growth and transformation. The father of the boy with an evil spirit (Mark 9:24) was honest about his struggle 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' Expressing doubt and unbelief can be key to the journey of faith.

Faith is trusting that God is holding us, even when we are not sure, because we are in unfamiliar territory. Our certainties can sometimes cause us to become rigid and afraid to go anywhere unfamiliar. This could be anything from trying new ways of praying to a radical change of job or lifestyle. Like Peter we are invited to get out of the apparent security of our boats and walk on the water, taking steps of trust in the one who has called us. Faith is about taking a risk and learning from the experience. As we do we discover how present God is in all of our experiences, even the most painful and desolate ones. Nothing is wasted with God on our journey into freedom of becoming who we were created to be.