

Imitating Christ

St Brandon's

1 Thess. 1:1-10; Matt. 22:15-22

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I wonder who your heroes or heroines have been and are, the role models in your life. Who are the people who have inspired or do inspire you, including in your faith journey? It might have been a teacher, perhaps a music teacher, or a sports-person, a famous actor or actress, or 'just' a friend. Someone you looked or look up to, respected or continue to respect. It might, of course, be someone who you haven't met – an author or authoress who inspires you through their words, for example. And it's quite possible that you want to be in some senses like those who have or do inspire you – to copy or imitate them.

But, then, who are the people who are not your heroes or heroines?! People who certainly don't inspire you, but on the contrary repulse you, and could not possibly be role models for you. Oddly, I could think more easily of people like that, than I could my heroes or heroines! (And it's one of the disadvantages of livestreaming and Facebook recording (more of that in a moment) that I don't feel able to mention these by name! Ask me afterwards!) But these are people you definitely would not wish to be like! The last thing you would want to do is to copy or imitate them!

But copying or imitating is, of course, a pretty fundamental part of life, for both humans and animals, certainly in the early years but also beyond. That's how we learn many of the basic 'life-skills', language being perhaps the most obvious. But that need to copy or imitate continues. One of the early external investors in Facebook did so because he saw in it for the first time a business that was built on people's deep need to copy. You needed to be part of it, so that you could be 'friends' with and 'like' other people. Everyone (or nearly everyone) would need to be part of the 'in crowd', and so it would be a good investment – as indeed it turned out to be.

Now what has all that got to do with our readings this morning, you may be asking. Well, it was the small phrase that Paul, Silvanus and Timothy used in our NT reading: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord" that set me on this line of thinking. And it's clear that the Thessalonians to whom they were writing were, in turn, good examples to others. The passage continues, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that *you became an example* to *all* the believers in Macedonia and in Archaia". Other believers had come to hear of what is described earlier in the passage as their "work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ". Having become imitators of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy and of the Lord, what role models they had then become for others to imitate! How do other churches view us, I wonder. Are we worth copying?

And this idea of imitation comes up elsewhere in the NT. "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" says Paul (1 Cor. 11:1). The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers to become "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12), and later in the same Epistle says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you;

consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (13:7). Mmm – no pressure there then!

But then we also get warnings not to imitate others. The Israelites are told, “When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations” (Deut. 18:9). And that indicates that it may not just be particular individuals that we should or shouldn’t imitate, but also cultural practices. Indeed, in the third letter of John he develops that when he says, “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good” (1:11).

So, we are people who, in our very nature, imitate both other people and cultural practices, and we are exhorted by our faith to be imitators of those people and cultural practices which are good, and not to be imitators of those which are not. And most particularly, we are exhorted to be imitators of Jesus as our ultimate role model. So, let’s see how all that works out in our gospel reading, and what that can teach us about Jesus and how we might imitate Him.

And what we have at the beginning of the gospel reading is an example of something we shouldn’t imitate! The chief priests and Pharisees realise, though they’re apparently a bit slow in doing so, that Jesus is being critical of them. But instead of considering that criticism, whether it’s valid or not, how they might respond to it and so on, the Pharisees plot “to entrap him in what he said”. And not only that, but they also get the Herodians on side. In other words, they gang up against Jesus, and it’s a classic case of all against one. ‘They’ will be OK, in the right, justified, if together they can isolate and indeed scapegoat Jesus. He’s the problem – let’s get him! But do you also see how individually they imitate each other in their desire to get rid of Jesus? Indeed, if you were part of that group, it would quite quickly become dangerous to stand out against the crowd. That’s how imitation can work at the group level.

But, in following Jesus, in trying to imitate Him who Himself stood out against the crowd, we are called, difficult as it may be, not to imitate the crowd when the crowd gets it wrong. Let me illustrate that by reference to a book I’ve just read, *There’s nothing here for you here*, by Fiona Hill. As you may know, Fiona Hill has just become the Chancellor of Durham University. She’s a Russian expert who is now an American citizen, and from 2017 to 2019 served as deputy assistant to US President Trump, and as senior director for European and Russian affairs to the US National Security Council. (And, if you want to read something that will reinforce your worst nightmares about Donald Trump, and why he is someone you certainly shouldn’t seek to imitate, this is it!)

But Fiona Hill grew up in Bishop Auckland, the daughter of a miner who lost his job when the mines closed and became a hospital porter, and a mother who was a nurse. The book is partly her story of being on the receiving end of the most appalling class-based and gender-based discrimination and disadvantage. And of coming across the worst of race-based discrimination when she moved to the USA. These were all examples of the privileged maintaining their status and advantages over against those who weren’t in their in-group.

And while her story is one of both determination and luck in somehow rising through and above all of that, so that her innate abilities were allowed to flourish – from the coal house to the White House as she puts it – she uses the book to make a plea and policy proposals for opportunities, particularly educational, for all, so that it's not left to chance for those today who are in a similar position to hers.

Who are we going to imitate? Which 'in-group' will we side with? With the privileged who want to protect their position? Or with those stand against privilege? If we are trying to follow and indeed imitate Jesus, what does that actually mean in situations like that?

Well, let's now turn to Jesus Himself in our gospel reading and see what we can learn from Him, here at least. And interestingly, we first learn something of what Jesus was like from those who have ganged up on Him. For although they meant it by way of flattery, trying to butter Jesus up so He would, perhaps, be taken off guard, they nonetheless speak the truth about Him: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality".

Now here are characteristics that are worth imitating – sincerity, truth-telling, regarding all as equals of one another irrespective of their 'station' in life. And imitation means more than just doing this kind of thing occasionally, or when it suits. Imitation means becoming like this, so that we are always, for example, sincere – not following Flanders and Swann's advice of a father to a son, "Son, son. I admire your sincerity. Always be sincere, whether you mean it or not"! But no, be sincere always, tell the truth always, regard all people without partiality always. Let us become like that. Let us imitate Jesus in these respects so that we become like Him, so that these characteristics form deep within us.

And further, Jesus of course wasn't taken in by their flattery and questioning, but saw through it for the malice it truly was. And He names it – "Why are you putting me to the test?" – and characterises them accurately – "hypocrites". So, Jesus has the wisdom to see through what's going on, and the courage to challenge it. Here are two more characteristics of Jesus that we would do well to imitate so that they become part of who we are.

Now it would also be nice if we could be like Jesus in one other respect – which is finding the wise and clever word on the spot to silence those who might be opposing us! Oh, to be able to do that rather than, as I tend to find, thinking of the very word that might have been the last word immediately afterwards! "Oh, if only I'd said ...". Well, yes it might be nice – though it might also make us pretty unpopular! – but in Jesus that response isn't just because He's very clever and has a way with words. It comes, I think, from the very depths of His being, from who he is as the Word (capital W) of God. God will, in the end, have the last word. So, while we might try to imitate Jesus in this respect too, we shouldn't worry too much if this is not a characteristic we have or can develop to any great extent.

So, be aware of imitation as part of who we are as humans. Beware imitation when it might lead us to follow the evil rather than the good, to follow the crowd when the crowd is wrong. Imitate those who are good role models. And most of all, let us imitate, let us try to become like, Christ.

Amen