As part of the Cathedral’s Golden Jubilee celebrations, we are currently hosting a fascinating art exhibition. It was installed at the beginning of September and will be here for a couple more weeks – until the end of October. It brings together a range of items with the aim of showing something of the journeys undertaken by the artists whose work is an integral part of the new Cathedral. We can see their early plans, sketches and models alongside the finished works of art we enjoy today.

The title of the exhibition, ‘Journey into the Light’, was inspired by the Cathedral’s architect, Basil Spence. His aim in building Coventry Cathedral was to create a journey from the ruins of the old Cathedral to the splendour of where we are now. A journey from despair to hope. A journey from death to life. To this day, every encounter, every visit, every act of worship, is intended to help each of us take a step further on our own journey into the light.

Looking at the exhibits and reading the accounts of how the various works of art came into being, it’s clear that the creative journey was often far from straightforward. There were major technical hurdles to be overcome, often related to the sheer scale of the building. It’s not every day that someone asks you to create a tapestry the size of a tennis court! As Basil Spence himself described it, the construction of his magnificent Cathedral took “eleven years of toil, frustration, hope and ecstasy”. The final results are indeed spectacular and often make a profound impact on those who come to see them. But the road to achieving what we see today was not an easy one.

The idea of being on a creative and challenging journey is one which we find in the New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus. As we hear and read the Gospel stories we are offered the opportunity to accompany the disciples as they in turn follow Jesus on a life-changing and costly voyage of discovery.

Following Jesus is a big step to take. And so he doesn’t go into the details of what it means until he is sure that they’re ready. The disciples need to be clear about who he is before they can respond to his life-changing invitation. So he paves the way by asking them what they’ve heard about him: “Who do people say that I am?”

It’s a vital question. If I become ill, I want to know that the person to whom I entrust my health can genuinely help me. And if someone comes along and invites me to hand over my life to them – which is, basically, the essence of what the Christian Faith is all about – I need to know who they are and whether or not they can be trusted. Is this person waving a stethoscope around properly qualified? Is this Jesus someone I can really depend on?

Who do people say I am? Jesus begins by canvassing opinions. What are the crowds saying? What conclusions have they reached about me? But, of course, other people’s ideas about Jesus aren’t enough. What matters is what we ourselves believe about him. So Jesus moves on immediately: ‘But who do you say that I am?’

One of the things which doting parents or grandparents can buy for their children these days are stories on CDs in which the actual names of their children are included in the reading of the story. My wife and I had twins who usually had to listen to the same thing at the same time, so I don’t think we ever did this! But it’s a great idea – helping a story really come alive for a child by making them part of it.

Something rather similar is going on here. It’s as if, while we’re watching the story, Jesus suddenly turns round, looks straight into the camera and addresses us personally. ‘David, who do you say that I am?’

It’s only as we get this sorted out that we’re ready to move to the next stage of the journey, the challenge to follow him, to risk everything on him. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”
‘Taking up the cross’ is how people sometimes describe some particular hardship or difficulty they’re having to face. ‘Yes, I know my neighbours run their washing machine at 3 o’clock in the morning, but I look upon it as the cross I have to bear’.

But this isn’t what Jesus means at all. This certainly isn’t how people would have understood him at the time. Taking up the cross had nothing to do with the mere inconvenience of an inconsiderate neighbour. It was much more immediate than that – an instrument of public execution.

This is what it means to follow Jesus. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself put to death during the Second World War, once put it, ‘When Christ calls someone, he bids them come and die’. To be a disciple is to face the prospect of imminent death.

Sometimes, of course, it can mean exactly that. History is littered with the corpses of those who, like Bonhoeffer, have lost their lives because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. But it doesn’t only mean that. Notice that Jesus links it together with the phrase ‘let them deny themselves’. Again, we tend to water this down with nonsense like ‘No, I won’t have a third slice of cake, thank you; I’m trying to deny myself’.

The apostle Paul had a better idea of what it’s about: ‘I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...’ I deny myself, I take up the cross, when I’m faced with a decision between what I want and what I believe God wants – and choose what God wants even though it may mean discomfort or even suffering.

Now immediately our inner selves rise up in rebellion against all this. Isn’t this a bit too extreme? Surely Jesus doesn’t mean this. But he does. And goes on to back it up. ‘For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?’

The missionary Jim Elliot, killed in a country in South America by those he was seeking to reach, had a really vivid way of getting this across: ‘He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose’. This is the point Jesus is making. As our American friends would say, ‘do the math’!

We end by noticing that the one we’re asked to follow does not merely invite our allegiance. He demands it as his right. Peter was quite right in the conclusion he had reached about the identity of Jesus. He is the Messiah – the Christ – Son of the Living God – God himself. So he has every right to command us to follow him. No matter what the consequences may be.

But it’s worth it! This is the wonderful thing about the journey Jesus invites us to make. A journey from the darkness of being alienated and far away from God into the light of friendship with him for all eternity. A journey to live for, yes. And a journey to die for as well.

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