Right from the start, Christians have been excited and enthusiastic about Jesus Christ. Of course we have! What unites us most of here in worship this morning is the conviction that he is good news, really good news, the best ever. That linking up with him is, quite simply, the key to the best kind of life there can be – as a friend of mine once put it, there’s ‘pie in the sky when you die and a slice on the plate while you wait’.

Getting this good news out there is one of the main jobs the church has been given to do – as Jesus himself said, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’... get people all across the world to follow me, to place me at the centre of their lives, to allow my teaching to guide them and my Spirit to give them the power they need – power to be part of the answer rather than carrying on with lives that make the problems worse.

So let me renew that invitation to each of us today. The invitation today, the 8th of July 2018, to take Jesus seriously, to make the commitment, in the words of St Richard of Chichester, to see him more clearly, to love him more dearly, and to follow him more nearly, day by day. Have you grasped enough of the wonder of who Jesus is to enable you to do that?

At one level, it’s very easy to do. We just take what we know about him (however little that may be – but don’t worry, it can grow later as we go along) and begin to live as though it were true. As we said in the confession earlier in this service, ‘For the sake of Jesus, who died for us, forgive us for all that is past, and help us to live each day in the light of Christ our Lord’.

That’s it exactly. ‘Live each day in the light of Christ our Lord.’ Aware that he is watching over us. Aware that he has standards and values that he would like us to live by. Aware that he has given gifts, resources, talents and opportunities for us to use to bring honour to him and to be of benefit to other people. This is what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ – living each day in the light of Christ.

OK. So far so good. But before we go too much further, I need to issue a health warning. I think it’s only fair to tell you that, if you are thinking about following Jesus like this, it is not going to be easy. It is going to be the most worthwhile thing you could ever do. But it isn’t going to be easy.

Not least because it wasn’t easy for Jesus himself. Have another look at today’s Gospel reading from Mark chapter 6. Given what had been happening, we might expect that everyone would be on board when it came to following Jesus. And it’s true that crowds of people were indeed gathering to hear what he had to say and to be amazed at what he could do. But there was a fly or two in the ointment. Jesus didn’t carry all before him.

For a start, the religious authorities resented his popularity and the way he challenged the closed shop of their authority. Their response was to reject him out of hand and begin to investigate how to have him quietly done away with.

But it wasn’t just them. The residents of his home town, even members of his own family, had trouble with him too. They were less than enthusiastic about following him and established a pattern that has continued ever since. Who Jesus is and what he does leads to some believing in him – but some not.

But why doesn’t Jesus just carry all before him anyway? In the previous chapters of Mark’s Gospel, he has stilled a storm, cast a legion of demons out of a man, healed an intractable disease with just a touch and raised a dead girl back to life. Surely he would have had no problem in displaying his divine power one more time and getting everyone to believe. Why didn’t he do this back then? And why doesn’t he do so now? Why does he make it difficult for himself? Why is he apparently so unwilling to make believing in him a little bit easier?
We’ll leave that as something to ponder, pausing perhaps to be helped a little by how the problem is described in Mark 6: ‘...he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.’

It’s worth asking how we are to understand this. Was it really that Jesus was unable to perform major miracles in an environment where there was limited faith? Was it a case of his needing positive vibrations in order for the power to flow? So that if the atmosphere wasn’t too good, then he couldn’t do very much?

This can’t be right. After all, this is God’s power we’re talking about. He doesn’t need faith-boosting positive vibes in order to get it together. No, the reason for Jesus’ apparent inability to do many miracles lies somewhere else. In verse 6, he’s not surprised by his own lack of faith: the problem is their refusal to have faith, their unwillingness to let the evidence about him displace their previous views.

And so ‘he was amazed at their unbelief’. All of which, roughly translated, means that, in the relationship between us and God, in the dance of Christian faith, it takes two to tango.

So – following Jesus Christ isn’t going to be easy because being Jesus Christ wasn’t very easy either.

But there’s a bit more for us to explore here. Something which takes us back to our first reading, from the great Christian leader Paul and his second letter to the Christian community in the city of Corinth. He has concluded that his life would be a great deal easier and his work of blazing a trail for Christ across the ancient world significantly more efficient if only he could be set free from a particular problem. We’re not told exactly what it was – and although scholars have come up with various ideas, we simply don’t know.

We just know that it is something Paul wants to be rid of and that he has prayed about – but God has, for some reason, said ‘no’. Just as for us, as we seek to follow Jesus today, we may find God saying ‘no’ when we might have hoped and even confidently expected that he would say ‘yes’... You see what I mean about following Jesus not always being easy?

The key is what God said to Paul and which he passes on to us. Here are some of the most sublime words in the whole of the Bible: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’. How we wish it wasn’t true. How much we would prefer it not to be the case. But there it is. For reasons that, given what else Paul says here, have to with the corrosive effect of human pride – the pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God – his power is made perfect in weakness.

Paul, being Paul, goes on to draw out the full implications of this. OK then, if that’s the case, I want to go the whole hog or, as our American friends would say, ‘go the whole nine yards’: ‘I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.’

Now we’re not saying that every element of this unhappy cocktail of ‘weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities’ will be our experience on a daily basis. But – just so that we’re clear – following Jesus Christ means that we are bound to encounter one or more of them from time to time. So don’t be surprised. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

At 4 o’clock this afternoon we’re gathering for a special service of Choral Evensong to remember the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Air Force. It just so happens that the RAF can sum up this morning’s sermon in just four words. (The answer to the question ‘So why didn’t you start with them and then stop?’ is not one that I feel able to answer!) The four words are in Latin and they are the RAF’s motto: ‘Per ardua ad astra’, which translates as ‘Through adversity to the stars’. That’s how Christianity works. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. Through adversity to the stars. Amen.