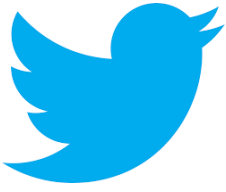


'Learning as we Follow', (The Church at Carrs Lane, 8th July 2018)

For some of us, 'following people' brings this to mind:

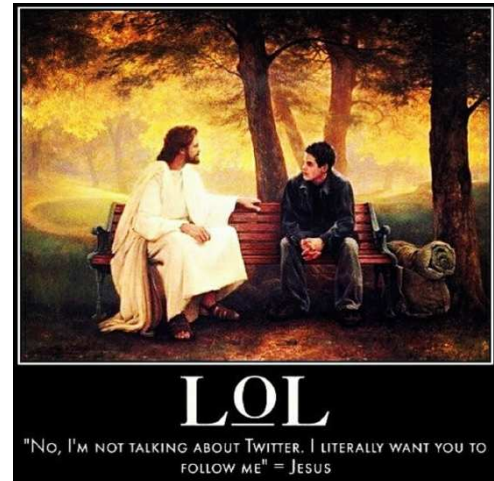


This is the logo for 'twitter', a website where you can write little updates about your day or your organisation, and people can choose to 'follow you'.

So many organisations ask for 'followers' all the time. See this banner from Birmingham's Bullring shopping centre:



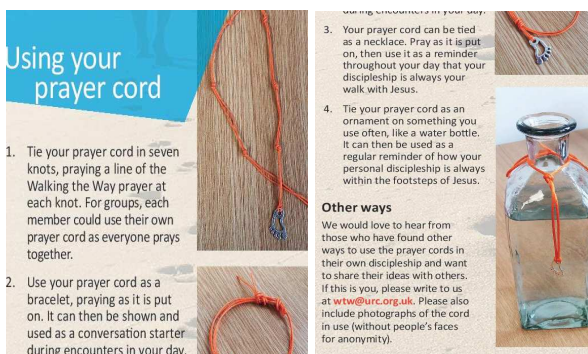
and this cartoon..



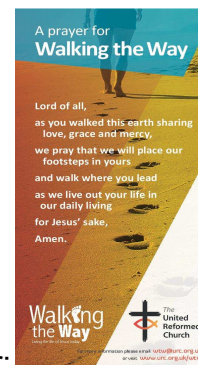
But actually it makes an interesting point... to 'follow' someone on twitter, means you regularly link up with what that person or organisation is doing – daily, or even hourly or more. When they post an update, a 'tweet', you may then share that tweet with the people who follow you. So there is an impetus to make the things you tweet meaningful or funny or inspiring, so that your followers share it with their followers.

The United Reformed Church (URC) has started a new programme called, 'Walking the Way' and they speak about how 'disciple' means 'one who learns as they follow'... I wonder what we are learning? And how good we are at 'following' when it comes to Jesus?

To help us remember that our life journey is about being that disciple, the URC have given us each a free gift which I'm going to pass on to you now! These prayer cords can be made into a neckcord, a bracelet, hung on your water bottle, the table lamp next to your favourite chair, put in your office or hung on a kitchen cupboard door...anywhere where it will remind you every day that our lives are about being disciples, ones who learn as we follow.



We shared in the prayer:



Bible readings

from Ephesians 3 verses 14 – 21 and Luke 10, verses 38- 43

When my sister and I were staying with an Indian friend's family, I felt uncomfortable with the gender separation at meals. My sister and I were guests and seated with the men in the dining area, food was brought by the women of the family, and they sat at a distance watching us eat and talk. We said we were women too and would like to sit with them, but it was not possible. There are rules. Politeness. Customs. So the women watched, and then a little later, when our breakfast was finished, the women had a chatty, giggly breakfast in the kitchen. No criticism of our kind and polite hosts, but I would rather have had a giggly breakfast with the other women.

I often recall this experience when I listen to this story:

Martha and Mary, friends of Jesus, invite him into their home. We was travelling with his disciples, so it's reasonable to assume they went too, though they are not mentioned at this point. It's a famous story – Mary doesn't go into the kitchen to help Martha prepare things for the guests. Martha is naturally cross. Mary is not doing as she is supposed to do.

There are various interpretations of this story, but we need to understand what is really happening here. Martha is likely capable of preparing food by herself. She is probably not too impressed that Mary is with at least one, and most likely several, men in the room when she should be in the kitchen.

But why is Jesus so keen on Mary's decision to sit at his feet? Because Mary is not just lolling about refusing to help in the kitchen. Mary is 'sitting at Jesus' feet'. Who does that? We hear that Paul sat at Gamaliel's feet (Acts 22:3)... this is the phrase used to say you are learning from someone, being their disciple so that you may learn everything from them and then be able to teach it.

So Mary isn't just skiving housework and acting like a lazy person or a guest (or even a contemplative)... Mary is making a statement that she is a disciple and will become a teacher.

And this may not seem particularly shocking to us, but this is wildfire. The Kingdom of God really rocking the boat.

Mary is contravening every social nicety and polite way to behave and making a statement that there is no barrier for her to be both a disciple and a teacher. And she is so confident – there is no record of her asking Jesus if it's okay to do that – she just does it. Mary 'gets it'. Jesus is doing a new thing.

As an inclusive and affirming Church, this is particularly interesting to us... (quote from Tom Wright): 'Jesus' valuation of each human being is based not on abstract egalitarian ideals, but on the overflowing love of God, which, like a great river breaking its banks into a parched countryside, irrigates those parts of human society which until now had remained barren and unfruitful.'

This leads us on to the Ephesians passage...

When someone is a true disciple, one who learns as they follow Jesus; when that person becomes 'rooted and grounded', thoroughly stable and mature in Jesus, it is then that they start to understand the broad, high, deep, long extents of God's love.

I'm reminded of the hymn, 'there's a wideness in God's mercy', which contains the line, 'for the love of God is broader than the measures of our minds'. And this is not a trickle of love which comes with a list of 'do's and don'ts', but an overflowing, transforming love which is as wild as a flood in a desert, bringing new life and flourishing and thriving... a love with no borders.

The Ephesians passage reminds us that God's message is for God's people to love broader, wider, deeper...more... if they want to love as God loves and if they are people rooted in the love of Jesus Christ. God's expansive, wild, overflowing love, demonstrated in Jesus and throughout the bible is no piecemeal wimpy attempt to be nice. It's the passionate love of a God who chooses not to do without us.

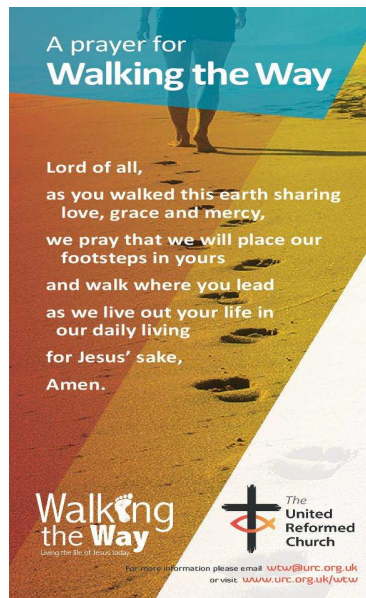
This isn't one of those 'pick a verse alone' things – it is a message that runs through the bible and these verses just put it into a concise package for us!

As an inclusive and affirming Church, we understand together that this love is to be withheld from no-one. And it's not about being liberal, woolly, undecided, confused, wimpish, or trendy. It's about for us, having an understanding of the overarching message of God shown in the bible, a God ever challenging God's people to think beyond their own boundaries and welcome more in, treat 'the other' well, not impose unnecessary rules on others, loving the vulnerable and unprotected, loving the strong and powerful, loving the person loved by God,... and it's about us understanding something of who Jesus is and what his ministry and mission were about.

Mary, a woman, welcomed as a trainee-leader and teacher... social mores and religious traditions overturned in a moment, and Jesus is pleased that Mary understands what he is about and who she can be...

The more we are rooted and grounded in Jesus, the more we become aware of the breadth, depth, height and length of God's love... How are we following this lead? Learning as we follow? We realise we can't become Jesus (Jesus is Jesus!), but being disciples means we become true followers, understanding and living out what Jesus is teaching and learning how to share that in our daily living...

In a few moments of quiet, we think about how we can 'learn as we follow', how we can effectively 'sit at Jesus' feet', receive his 'tweets' moment to moment in our lives, be people who live out God's love... even in new, broader, deeper, more extensive ways...



(Quiet) We pray together...

(Ruth Yorke)