

Despite all my plans to do something meaningful with my life straight out of college, without any real intention or discernment, I slid into the ethically murky world of television advertising. The allure of this work in the 1990s was definitely the brilliance of the folks I got to work with. The finest creative minds of a generation were laser-focused on the task of selling toothpaste and laundry detergent. The ads being made by these folks at that time were seriously good. Committed brand loyalties were worth millions of dollars, and were being intentionally and skillfully built, one super-short film, and one brilliant tagline at a time. It was the “golden era” of TV advertising.

.. it gave us “Got Milk;” “Just Do It” from Nike; and Apple’s “Think Different” campaign. It was all about tapping into and exploiting the human instinct for identity and belonging, and creating powerful emotional affinities for brands. Brand loyalty could actually become part of someone’s own identity, part of what or who they considered themselves, or aspired, to be.

In the UK, in those years, the advertising was ‘next level,’ we’d often pay far more attention during the ad breaks than to the TV shows they aired in. The ads, these super-short, brilliant films asked nothing of us but offered enormous viewing satisfaction, we were delighted, delighted by their cleverness, we’d laugh, sometimes we’d be moved to tears, we might be inspired to believe in a better future, or indulge in the reassuring warmth of tradition. It was a real treat!

Amongst all these, was an ad which has since become iconic. Even now there are few things less glamorous to advertise than ... wood stain. But one of the most memorable ads of the era still reverberates today through British culture.

The ad was entirely practical, showing this stuff in action and ending with the now classic memorable tag-line that said “Ronseal wood stain. It does exactly what it says on the tin.”

Genius. That one short line is so satisfying, it offers clarity and gives us confidence that we know what we’re getting into. We can be sure of what it is, it *is* what it claims to be, and so it won’t disappoint, it does/is exactly what it says it is. Since then, “it does exactly what it says on the tin” has become idiomatic in the UK for anything or anyone particularly appreciated for being straightforward, honest, as-expected and clear, reliable, and self-explanatory. Attributes that are all deeply appreciated by the culture at large; no fluff, just clarity.

I think this tag-line lives on because this is what we want, this honesty and clarity is what we’re longing for in all aspects of our life. If we know what we’re dealing with, we can decide how to respond. If we understand, if there’s full-disclosure about what’s being offered, we can choose, decide whether or not we want it.

In today’s Gospel reading, someone says to Jesus: I will follow you wherever you go. What does this person think they’re signing up for, what do they think they’re getting into? Are they making their decision based on full-disclosure?

If we look around us today, many Christians gather around the love, the gentleness, the warmth, the *feeling* of being loved and being accepted; this is what they understand Jesus’ Way to be.

Others will see it differently, they're enlivened and energized for the Christian life by Jesus' harsh critique of the world we've built, and his stern warnings that we must surely repent or die!¹ They want to be agents of change, this is what they understand the Way to be.

And others have a powerful connection to the past, they've inherited the culture of church, the life-giving rhythm of the week, they are the stewards of the tradition and they work hard to keep the important old ways alive.

On face value, it seems folks can each choose from many different 'brands' of Christianity.

And so, Jesus' response to the two folks in today's reading is something of a truth-in-advertising moment. If you want to be part of it, you've got to know, in full, what you're signing up for, you've got to know, first, "what it says on the tin."

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The Gospel is the good news of the truth of God in Christ. The Gospel reconciles us to God; restores our relationship with God and one another through healing and forgiveness; the good news of God in Christ makes us a new and eternal Creation as living members of Christ's body, united in love, called into freedom and fullness of life. The Gospel will, undoubtedly, transform this world of ours, make it just, and bring lasting peace...

¹ see Luke 13:3

... and it's all too easy for a particular 'brand' of Christianity to be mistaken for the Gospel Way. A 'brand' of Christianity something partial: engaging, stimulating, challenging, entertaining even at times, an aspect of the Way, a 'brand' of Christianity we readily identify with, the bits we love, that can absolutely, and quite easily, become a part of our identity – it's all too easy for *this* to be misunderstood as the power, depth and breadth of the Gospel Way, of Jesus' Way.

The Gospel is more than something to listen to or engage with from time to time. The Gospel is more than something clever, or something ancient, that's satisfying for us to connect with. The Gospel is more than the emotions that arise from our encounters with it, the joy, the love, the hope even. The Gospel is also more than the community that gathers around it, the safety of that habit, and the safety and familiarity we feel being part of something, identifying with something important.

Today's reading from Luke could be understood as Jesus saying, Yes, I see you feel drawn to the Gospel, drawn to follow me, but are you sure you know what this all is, is it clear to you what, exactly, you're choosing?

True discipleship, Jesus is telling us, is all in. True world-changing, life transforming discipleship is all in. To follow Jesus, to be 'all in' on the Way is *to risk*: it's being willing to re-order life, it's being able to detach from the comforts and familiarities that we instinctively want to hold on to, just to be safe. The Way is unpredictable when it's chosen and even when we're on it and in it, and we might not always like it, and it will be hard at times.

We're called into that risk, to be ready to let go of stability, predictability, to be willing to not know how things will turn out, to be ready for things not to be the way we would choose for ourselves, and to trust the Way nonetheless.

This, all of this, is a hard sell, but it's honest, it's straightforward, it's clear. Jesus lays out what choosing the Way involves. If the Gospel is ever to do "exactly what it says on the tin" we have to understand that discipleship is costly, does involve risk; it's so much more than the 'brand' of Christianity with the greatest appeal.

The Gospel has mighty power, *if*, we who choose to follow Christ, know what we're getting into: that we must be a participant not a viewer. We are necessary co-creators in the transformation of the world, and not consumers of one of the many 'brands' of Christianity on offer.

So let's not be satisfied with any small part of it, the cleverness, the challenge, the tradition or the hope, thinking about it all from a safe and theoretical distance. Let's not make our participation conditional on an abundance of only the good bits, the loving relationships, the compassion and inclusion ... while ignoring the rest: the risk, the discomfort, and the uncertainty.

The Gospel will do exactly what it says on the tin, when we're all in, and this is what Jesus wants us to know.