

Discipleship 5

09/07/17 09:30 & 11:15

Last week in our sermon series on Discipleship we heard Jesus speaking in what, in Christian circles, is called the Sermon on the Mount. We reflected that the call of discipleship is to a life that is counter to much of the culture of this, and in fact, every age.

Today we continue to develop this thinking on what being a follower of Jesus Christ might mean. We will reflect that a disciple is one who shows their faith through what they do in their life, as much as their confession with their lips. And the call of that doing is costly.

One day a young woman was walking home from work when she saw a sight a little girl standing on the street corner, begging. The little girl's clothes were paper thin and dirty, her hair matted and unclean, and her cheeks red from the cold. The young woman dropped a few coins in the begging bowl, gave the girl a smile and walked on. As she walked she started to feel guilty. How could she go home to her warm house with its full pantry and well supplied wardrobe while this little girl shivered on the street. The young woman also began to feel angry, angry with God. She let her feeling be known in a prayer of protest. "God, how can you let these sort of things happen? Why don't you do something to help this girl?" And then, to her surprise God answered. He said, "I did do something. I created you."

In our first reading and Gospel Jesus makes the point that proclaiming and doing are the hallmarks of understanding what it means to be his disciple. We are not proclaiming rightly if we are not also led to do. For the disciple, head, heart, will and hands are integrated into a life that trusts God and serves our fellow humanity.

Jesus asks Peter "But who do you say that I am?". A question asked of each of his disciples throughout time. "Who am I for you?" says Jesus. Some of us will not be able to answer as confidently as Peter "The Messiah of God". Some of us will have been taught that that was the correct answer way back in Sunday School, but we haven't followed through that response much recently. Today, some of us might have enough faith to say yes Jesus I do believe you are the Son of God, and I want to follow you. Many of us wish we had just a bit more faith.

But Peter was unaware that his proclamation of faith led to a place that was surprising and disturbing. For Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me". For the disciple, doing follows proclamation. Peter's declaration of faith is the right starting place. But to be a disciple he must reflect that faith in the way he lives his life. And that will be costly - he must carry his own cross as he follows Jesus. And that call too comes to every disciple of Jesus. Confession of faith is the key starting place, but it is from that place that the journey of faith begins.

Martin Luther is quoted as saying "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing." But this perhaps is where we all struggle with the reality of the call to be a follower of Jesus. If discipleship is more than a confession with our lips, and actually a call to transform the way we live our lives, that is challenging and difficult. For the disciple is asked to place God in Christ at the centre of our lives, loving him more than anything else. And that means foregoing our own desire for importance, our own ego, and placing our trust in Jesus as we come to know him through the scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The cross that we are to carry is nothing less than to die to ourselves, that in us Jesus might live. How hard I find that bit. The little (or sometimes not so little) voice within that urges me to do something for my own sake, to look good, or seem important. I imagine you know that voice? But it is not me that matters, but Christ. And to deny myself is in itself a cross to carry.

But carry our cross as a disciple must also mean turning our backs on the comforts of our own lives. Today, you have all been given a postcard sized card. Its about the launch of the new future for St John's church in our parish. After many months of thinking and praying, under Penny's leadership, we have discerned the call of God for us to bring some new energy and life to St John's by inviting Christians to come and join us. We think this may involve creating a whole new more informal service, alongside the existing more traditional pattern of worship. We are particularly approaching the large number of Christians who live around St John's, but who currently attend Greyfriars Church over the river. And all of this is being done with the blessing and encouragement of Greyfriars PCC, who have as part of their mission as a parish to resource other churches. Christians are being asked to search their hearts to see if God is calling them away from the comforts of their own current church setting to a new, and yet largely unplanned, future at St John's. There might just be some of us who hear the call of God to join this new adventure. So we've given all of you a card, that allows us to find out more, and asks us to pray for what we are planning.

Finally, in case this all seems too much, we remember that the dialogue about the cost of discipleship we heard today in Luke's Gospel between Jesus and Peter. Peter, the disciple on whom Jesus built his church. But the disciple who failed so much. We recognise that Jesus isn't setting us to do the impossible. As disciples we are asked to carry the cross of losing our own identity, or turning away from the worlds endless focus on materialism, but recognising that we are frail and will almost certainly fail. But Jesus still asks each one of us: "who do you say that I am?" As we confess, might we find the faith to follow his as disciples, despite the cost?