

All Age July 2017 – Discipleship 5: Be Warned

The great Martina Navratilova was once asked about the difference between a tennis player and a tennis champion. She said it was like the difference between ham and eggs: “the hen is involved; the pig is committed.”



As we are half way through a series about discipleship it seems fair to ask what the difference is between a churchgoer and a disciple of Jesus. I would suggest a churchgoer is involved in God’s work whilst a disciple of Jesus is committed – just like that pig.



Something which struck me during reports of the recent Grenfell Tower disaster was pictures of firefighters and police officers going into the burning building, while everyone else was trying to escape. Why would anyone go into a situation which they knew would be dangerous, unpleasant, uncomfortable, and likely to involve them seeing things they would long wish they’d never seen?

For firefighters, and emergency service workers in general, it is because they are people with a purpose. They are committed to making a difference in the world, for the better.

My parents weren’t churchgoers so I didn’t attend Sunday School as a child. Some of those who did tell me that over the years they picked up the underlying idea that if you were good and did the things God wanted then life would be smooth and everything would go well. So when the inevitable storms came and life went pear-shaped they felt it must be their own fault. God wouldn’t renege on his side of the bargain, so they must have done something wrong, to “deserve” their troubles, right?



Instead I came to faith as an adult and, guess what, the typical evangelistic adult spiel tells the same underlying story: come to Jesus, do x, y and z, and your troubles will be over.

Except, when I read the Bible and I read what Jesus says, it is nothing like that at all.

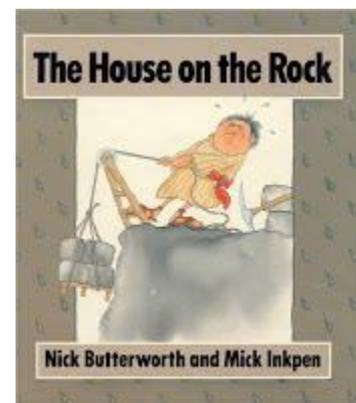
“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” That’s what Jesus says, and St Paul, in his letters, reminds the early disciples of his warnings whilst he was with them that facing hardships and persecution is part and parcel of being a follower of Jesus.

If (when!) we find ourselves struggling and in difficulty it is not because God doesn’t like us or has abandoned us – anything but. God’s love for us is absolute and his support for us in times of trouble guaranteed.

I’ll come back to that in a minute, but first I do just want to reinforce the point about being people with a purpose. As those who were here last week will have heard, disciples are called to be **different**: we are to share God’s grace and love with all who will hear it, no matter who they are; we are to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to forgive freely; we are to speak truth to power, and to sacrifice ourselves for others: we seek to restore the world in God’s way not our own.

Of course we meet opposition from a world whose core values are self-centred and vengeful! **Of course** we are likely to face pain and hardship! Just like the firefighters (and so many other emergency services workers) we have a purpose and a calling which takes us into difficult situations, along with a hope and a sense of meaning which shines through in the way we deal with these situations.

Two weeks ago, the theme in our discipleship series was about being rooted in God. Firefighters and the like don’t just go into horrible situations unprepared: they train and practice and practice and train. Then they train some more, so when the fire comes they are ready. Just like in our *House On A Rock* story earlier: when the storms come those who have worked and trained and practiced to build their life on Jesus are ready. It doesn’t mean the storms are



pleasant – of course not – but it does mean they can be faced. Preparation matters!

Which brings me back to what I said earlier: God’s love for us is absolute and his support for us in times of trouble guaranteed. That applies whether we are prepared or unprepared, whether we feel our hands are clean or filthy: God is on our side, and Jesus is at our side, whatever we go through, wherever we are.

Except ... it doesn’t always feel like that, does it?

When we are surrounded by darkness; when we cannot see, or feel, or hear anything or anyone, where is Jesus then?

Training and practice in stepping out in faith helps, but all the training in the world doesn't make the reality easy. All we can do is screw up all the trust in Jesus we can muster – never enough, but God knows that and his grace makes the difference – and step into the darkness. Step in trepidation or step boldly, it doesn't matter.

As you step, reach out your hand for Jesus. Even if you have no indication he is there, trust and reach out. Keep on stepping through the darkness until you reach that door that you trust is there, in trust that by the end Jesus will have taken your hand and will see you safely through to the other side.

The word 'faith' in the Bible means 'active trust', and it is in the darkness that our trust is called into action. And the weaker we feel, the more God's Grace is there to lead us on.

St Paul, writing to his friend Timothy, reckons the end of his journey has come: *"I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has arrived."* Here and elsewhere he looks forward, not just to a time of rest with Jesus, but to resurrection, to a 'crown of righteousness' in the new heaven and new earth which are to come, where God himself will wipe away every tear and where death and mourning and crying will be no more. Paul looked forward in faith and hope to a world of justice and peace, which he knew he had played his part in forming.

For Paul hadn't just been *involved* in Jesus' work, he had been *committed* ... and he looked forward in hope to his reward.

Let's pray ...