

Discipleship 6: Making A Difference – July 16th, 2017

This week's topic in our eight-week discipleship series is 'Making a difference'. Last week we spoke about being 'people of purpose' and facing up to the darkness as we go out to take Jesus' love and grace to those who need to hear it. As disciples we seek to go where Jesus goes and to do what Jesus does. This week we are focussing on joining with Jesus in action to really make a difference in our local communities and in the world.

The readings for the week are a mixed collection, reflecting the need to balance our actions with our rootedness in God. We need to be active as disciples, but it's not enough just to 'do stuff', as disciples we need to do the stuff that Jesus is doing in the places where Jesus is doing it.

Let's start with the excerpt from James' letter, noting that when the NRSV translation talks about 'works' what it means is 'action'. So faith which does not result in action is dead, James tells us. It's not enough to wish someone well when they are naked and hungry, we need to actually do something about it – we need to make a difference.

To spiritualise it a bit: when we ask God's blessing on someone we need to be sure that we ourselves are willing to be used by God to make that blessing happen.

The reading from the prophet Isaiah follows a similar tack: if we say we worship God then we need to do the things he wants done: justice and freedom from oppression – of all kinds – God's people sharing what we have with the hungry, the homeless and the unclothed. At the same time we need to avoid the evils which sometimes come with religion: the denials of freedom, the judgementalism, the malicious talk about those who don't fit in with our ideas.

Back in Biblical times "everyone knew" that worship is about sacrifices, about food (feasting or fasting, depending on season) and about standing in prayer before God. Back in the late 20th Century "everyone knew" that worship is about going to church on Sunday, about music (of one sort or another) and about kneeling in prayer before God. It would be really nice to think that as the 21st Century goes on churchgoers will discover the message of the prophets: that the worship God wants involves doing what is right, all week, showing grace and mercy to those in need, all week, and walking humbly with our God, all week – as the prophet Micah put it.

So does that mean we should stop all our churchgoing, our musical praise and our corporate prayer? In a word, no ... but maybe we need to reconsider what the

purpose of these things is. Because a faith journey which is focussed just on ourselves and our own supposed relationship with God is a taker's journey not a disciple's. A self-centred spirituality is simple idolatry. A faith which makes no impact on the needs around us is no faith at all. Our worship needs to be about action as well as about the source and motivation for that action.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading, with its provocative account of what faith in action might look like. Mary has a jar of expensive nard, a valuable perfumed oil. Judas thinks she should sell it for the benefit of the poor; Mary pours it out over Jesus' feet. Was that a waste, as Judas suggests? How does it fit in with what James and Isaiah say about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked?

I think we could do with a bit of background here. Is everyone familiar with the 'Mary and Martha' story (Luke 10:38-42, immediately before Jesus' teaching on prayer)? Can someone just give a quick summary for the benefit of anyone who doesn't remember it?

... [Mary & Martha sisters, Jesus and disciples come to visit, Martha - really busy looking after them while Mary sits at Jesus' feet – has a moan, Jesus says that what Mary has chosen *"is better and will not be taken away from her."*]

In today's Gospel reading we again have Martha busily serving - using her talents to make a difference – and again there's Mary at Jesus' feet. This time though she is anointing Jesus' feet with that expensive perfume, instead of selling it for the poor. So what's going on?

Throughout this discipleship series we have been using a working definition of discipleship as 'going where Jesus goes and doing what Jesus does'. We have looked at inviting others to share that journey with us; at the importance of being rooted in God; at the distinctiveness which comes from being Jesus' disciples, doing things his way rather than the way of the world; and at being people of purpose going into the places of darkness where hurt and hardship lie because that is where we are called to make a difference by carrying the message of God's Grace and love in Jesus.

Martha was the sister who liked to serve Jesus with her hands, whilst Mary was the one who liked to sit at Jesus' feet, absorbing the things he said and did into herself. Because Mary had learnt to see things from Jesus' point of view, she could see what needed doing at that time. Not what the world would do, not even what the religious people would think best, but what was needful in that particular place at that particular time, which could be done by Mary, that particular disciple of Jesus.

Mary wasn't really an activist, but when the time to act came she did what needed doing and she made a difference.

Judas wanted her to sell the perfume, but she knew, instinctively because her instincts had been honed by the time she spent in Jesus' presence, what God needed her to do. She poured out her ointment for Jesus just as Jesus would soon pour out his very life for us.

To go back to Isaiah's challenge to those who focussed on the 'religious' stuff and ignored the needs of the people around them: worship is only meaningful if it results in action, and action is only meaningful if it is rooted in worship. Faith without action is dead, action without faith is meaningless, if you prefer James' version.

My impression of St John's, over the years, has always been of a 'Martha' church. With a fair smattering of more contemplative 'Marys', but nonetheless with an overall focus on doing stuff in practical service. In many ways the letter of James, probably Jesus' brother, is as close as we get to the approach of John the Baptist (Jesus' cousin), so it's appropriate that we lean that way.

At the moment, as a church, we are in the middle of a big push to really make a difference in our local community. To truly be a community church who take God's grace and blessing in Jesus out into our local neighbourhood. Potentially a really exciting part of that is the invitation we are extending to those who currently worship at Greyfriars to come and join us as we seek to spread the knowledge and love of Jesus amongst the nine and a half thousand people who live here in Eastern Caversham.

That will need a great deal of practical action but it still needs to be firmly and deeply rooted in God and in prayer.

It's a funny thing, prayer. Although often used by some 'religious' people as an excuse for inaction, as a way of handing a problem off onto God, it can and should be a source of tremendous power and grace in the building of God's Kingdom. One way of looking at this is to say that intercessory prayer, asking God to do stuff, should always carry a (usually implicit) clause along the lines of: *"God, this is something I really care about but I can't see how to deal with it. Please will you help, and if there is something I can do, please show me and I will do it."*

Prayer is about action, about preparation for action, and about guidance and focus so that the action we do makes a difference in God's Kingdom. In a church there need to be Marys who can sit at Jesus feet and pray and there need to be Marthas

who can get out and do stuff, and the Marys and Marthas need to work together. But also the Marys need always to be ready to take action at the right time and the Marthas need to root all they do in Jesus.

This afternoon there is a meeting here at 4 o'clock to sit at Jesus' feet and seek his vision for the future of our work here in this community, to pray about partnership with a group from Greyfriars, and hopefully to eat cake. If at all possible, please do come and be a part of that. It matters.

Then, during the week ahead, keep on looking out for Jesus: where is he at work, who is he working with or in, how can you join in. What one thing can you do this week to make a difference in someone's life? Even something as simple as a phone call, or as complex as clearing out and donating the excess possessions from your home. How will you put your faith into action by blessing someone else this week?

To pull all this together: do you see this coin? It's just one coin yet it has two sides - a head and a tail - and they don't separate. See: a head and a tail; faith and works, worshipping God and changing the world, prayer and action. All two sides of one coin. And if you try to have just one side ... well, that's a fake and a forgery, isn't it?

May your week ahead be filled with opportunities to deepen your faith and to make a difference in someone's life. And may you seize those opportunities with joy, knowing that you are a person of purpose in God's Kingdom, making a real difference in this world and in the world to come. Amen.