

SERMON FOR JANUARY 6TH 2013

At the start of a New Year we are beginning a new series on the subject of discipleship and to introduce it I want to read you a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer from a book written in 1937 called "The Cost of Discipleship" – now regarded as a classic which I take to mean that it is a book that over time has not lost its potency, power and relevance:

"Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ" (Put up on wall)

It is the reasoning behind what is a dramatic statement that provides the basis for this 10 week series when we will be asking the question:

"What does it mean to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ? When we use the term "discipleship" – what exactly does that look like in our everyday lives?"

"Disciple" is not a term we use that frequently about ourselves is it?

If asked we would tend to refer to ourselves as "Christian"

How many times in the New Testament are followers of Christ called "Christian".

The answer is three.

The very first time is where?

It is in Acts Chapter 11 where Luke records for us that it was in Syrian Antioch that the disciples of Jesus were first called "Christian". It was an international community and it is appropriate that its members were called Christian in order to indicate that their ethnic and cultural differences were overcome by their common allegiance to Christ. Later on in Acts we also have another reference when Paul was on trial before King Agrippa and as Paul shared his testimony King Agrippa stopped him and declared: "Do you think in this short time you can persuade me to be a Christian".

The third and last reference is when Peter wrote this to the Church in his first letter:

"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name".

Just three times the word "Christian" is used in the whole of the New Testament and let me point this out – Christians were called disciples first (does that make sense to you!) Certainly scripture talks more about disciples than Christians – so given that the term has been largely forgotten or forsaken I contend that we need to breath fresh air into what the word really means.

Let us go back to when and where the term got established.

In the world Jesus entered into in the first century everyone knew what a disciple was because - to coin a phrase - they were ten a penny. Lots of people were disciples of someone or another.

Disciples were individuals who had attached themselves to somebody else – in order that they might learn from the other person. The person so attached was called "mathetes" – disciple – and the person to whom he or she was attached to was called "didaskalos" – teacher.

So a disciple was a learner or follower – someone committed to a significant master – and discipleship means "the state of being a disciple" – something that is active, progressive and ongoing.

There were many examples from the scriptures of disciples outside of those who followed Jesus.

John the Baptist had his group of disciples who were so committed to him that even when John languished in prison his disciples continued to visit him there, presumably not without a degree of risk, such was their devotion.

The Pharisees also had a structure that involved teachers and disciples.

That was necessary because their zealous commitment to the law and its correct observance meant that they raised innumerable questions that someone had to answer.

That was the job of the teachers.

For example, Pharisees knew that to work on the Sabbath was to desecrate something specifically instituted by God. That was clear enough, but what was not clear was "What exactly is work?"

Carrying a burden, they decided, was work. So – the question was then asked if having false teeth was the equivalent to carrying a burden?

Someone decreed that it was - and therefore if worn on the Sabbath it meant it must be sinful.

Having determined this interpretation of the Law, it was necessary for the leaders to spread the word. And how did they do it?

It was through the teacher - disciple method.

Pity the poor disciples of the Pharisees because they had no less than 365 prohibitions and 250 commandments to memorize, teach and live by.

One notable aspect of the Pharisees – their demanding discipleship system rewarded only the best and the brightest – so effectively they were the only ones destined to the top places on the religious ladder.

Jesus of Nazareth chose the same method of the teacher – disciple when He embarked on His public ministry and he chose the disciples who would form the nucleus of the future Church.

Every gospel has an account of Jesus calling His first disciples.

We will look at Mark where there are two separate passages of this calling to them. The first is:

Mark 1: 16 – 20 (Page 947)

Mark records for us that he called two sets of brothers – Simon and Andrew and James and John – all of whom were fishermen. They would have been running a small business – hard work but with it came day to day financial security - if not great comfort or wealth. But when Jesus called them we read they gave that all up and followed him - and the readiness with which they responded and left everything is staggering.

So why did they give it all up to follow a wandering preacher?

The same reason I would say as to why believers today give up certain lifestyles in order to respond to the call of Jesus to “Follow Me”.

The answer can only be in the person of Jesus himself – and in the astonishing magnetism of His presence, personality and authority.

The second passage focusing on the calling of the first disciples from Mark is Mark 3: 13 – 18 (Page 948)

The 12 Jesus chose were a very strange assortment – a mixture of Galileans’ and Judeans with very contrasting backgrounds.

In choosing these men Jesus broke from the usual traditions of His time – for there are striking differences between the disciples of Jesus and the other groups who were around at the time.

One significant one is that He chose and called them – usually the person following did the choosing who they went to.

Another is that they were not regarded as intellectually clever or ceremonially clean – he even chose a despised tax collector - Matthew.

Have to say, humanly speaking, if you wanted to really impress and influence the world, you would not choose any of the people Jesus chose.

When Jesus called them – what did He call them to?

Primarily - and most importantly - they were called to Jesus himself.

The most important thing was not how much of his teaching they could remember and recite – but it was their relationship with Him.

It was Jesus himself – not His teaching – that was the object of their commitment and devotion.

Jesus called them and then He shared His life with them – He gave himself - totally - to them.

They became committed to Him because of His commitment to them.

While it is clear that the basis of their discipleship was their relationship with Him, it is also becomes clear that the outworking of that relationship was one of their service under His leadership , and any understanding of discipleship that does not incorporate the idea of personal relationship with Christ, a commitment to serve Him, and a readiness to live under His authority is by definition inadequate.

I should point out that the Mark passage we have just read does refer specifically to the Twelve. The uniqueness of their relationship to Christ was such that perhaps not everything in Jesus’ call to them is transferable to us as modern – day disciples. But having said that, we must remember that Jesus also commissioned the very first disciples to “make disciples”; and there can be little doubt that what they had learned in their experience with Him became the substance of what they recorded and handed down to us.

So –discipleship meant following, learning and imitating. All three concepts are strikingly evident in the impact that Christ had on His disciples – something we are going to explore in this series – but at the outset I want to make sure we are clear as to how to answer the question “What is a disciple”

Put simply, a disciple is a person who has an ongoing, life changing relationship with a significant other person – in this case Jesus Christ – and then gladly shares with others what he or she has learned.

Discipleship is not a programme or an event – it is a way of life.

Discipleship is not for a limited period – but for our whole life.

Discipleship is not for beginners alone – it is for all believers for every day of their lives.

I hope that is clear (Is it?)

Following this, I must ask another question.

Why is discipleship so challenging?

Why should this not be a comfortable series if we are going to be true and faithful to the teaching and example of Jesus as to what being a disciple entails?

C S Lewis wrote that the word he detested the most was “interference” – because he did not like someone else telling him what to do.

That is generally us too is it not?

But, that is what Discipleship is all about.

I suspect most of us would like to reap the harvest of discipline while living a life of relative sloth. We would want all the benefits of humility and growth without actually learning from being humbled and the painful pruning that is essential for growth to happen.

From my reading and understanding of scripture - and from personal experience - I am convinced we do require a great deal of interference to stem the tide of self indulgence and self absorption in our hearts , and the willing allowance of this positive interference lies at the very heart of what it means to grow as a disciple.

There are two things that Jesus calls us to in our relationship with Him – two things that He both preached and practiced and made very clear that anyone who followed Him would need to embrace as an essential and expected part of being His disciple.

The first is obedience.

Just before He went to the cross he said this to his disciples:

“If you love me keep my commands – anyone who loves me will obey my commands” (That is from John Chapter 15 – we will spend three weeks in that Chapter in this series)

Jesus calls us to Himself and then calls us to unconditional obedience.

If you or I really believe in Jesus then it is shown in outward obedience to His commands and example.

Is not the main reason people find it hard to believe actually because it is so hard to submit and obey.

Is not the reason why being a disciple is so tough is because obedience is so tough.

The Simon who was renamed Peter presents us with a great lesson and encouragement as a model of learning as a disciple because he made so many mistakes, and one he had to learn quickly from was when he said to Jesus (which he did on at least two occasions):

“No Lord”

He had to learn that to say “No Lord” is a contradiction in terms.

Yet, the temptation before us all is to want the comfortable compromise of conditional discipleship - to say “yes” to certain things - but a definite “no” to others things.

But the old adage is true – if Christ is not Lord of all – He is not Lord at all”.

When it comes to the struggle to be obedient I would say that, as Disciples of Christ, we need a vision to inspire us. An athlete will have the vision of an Olympic medal – our vision should be to be like Christ. Our vision should be to absorb the example of Christ into our lives by meditating on the characteristics of his life found in the Scriptures and on how all that He taught He also practiced.

He can call us to obedience – because He showed us what obedience meant. He was absolutely obedient to His Father's will - which meant laying down His life down completely.

Jesus will not ask us to do something He hasn't done himself.

He gave us an example – He showed us the way – and in obedience He is our inspiration and example.

Being a disciple has to start with this heart attitude and with that comes the process of being shaped into his likeness. The life of discipleship should be marked by progress – but it does not mean perfection. Growing in faith

and obedience will involve good seasons and bad ones – it will involve victories and defeats – it will involve stagnant times as well as vibrant times. The key thing for the disciple is to have a heart that desires to please God - and that means a desire to be obedient to His will.

The second thing that any disciple of Christ is called to is again not something that we are naturally drawn to. That it is a call to suffer.

If being a disciple means following Christ – then we cannot escape the fact that the way of Christ inevitably involved the way of the cross.

Jesus continually taught and forewarned the 12 disciples about His own suffering. He also made it clear that they cannot expect it to be any easier – and he made it clear how the world would react to his message.

Very simply he said this – also from John 15:

“If the world hates you remember it hated me first – servants are not greater than their masters – if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also – in this world you will have trouble”

He was right of course!

Let us go back to our first passage in Mark 1 – the calling of Andrew, Simon, James and John.

Read verses 16 - 18

“Come follow me – I will make you fish for people!

On that day they were called, I wonder if they thought through what that actually meant?

Did they know how the people in question would feel about it?

Did they have any idea that both of them would end up being crucified ?

Did James – son of Zebedee and brother of John – have the slightest idea that within a few years, because he followed Jesus, that he would be dead – beheaded on the order of King Herod?

No – on the day Jesus called them - of course they didn't.

All they knew on that day is that they were compelled to follow Him – but at the start of that journey they didn't know where it all would eventually lead them.

For us the same is true. We start by responding to the call to follow and then Jesus – in His mercy – reveals things little by little and step by step.

Have to add that Andrew and Simon – or Peter as he would become – also did not know that they would be remembered and revered as a source of inspiration to the Church down the ages to the present day.

But on that day that Jesus called them in that little town of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee – they neither envisioned the pain or the glory that would follow. They only saw Him and said “yes” to the call - and that is always where the journey of discipleship begins.

I must put some balance here, for you may be sitting here now thinking:

“So is responding to the call to follow Jesus a grim, unrewarding business – a reluctant acceptance of hardship and suffering?

Actually Jesus says No – and here is the paradox.

It does involve obedience and suffering – but Jesus also calls us to a life in abundance.

So what does this mean?

To help us understand that one more passage from Mark – Mark 10: 24 – 31. (Page 959)

Jesus has just had an encounter with a very rich man who though he said he wanted to follow didn't like to obedience part and when told to sell everything he refused and Jesus then allowed him to walk away.

The disciples were both amazed and confused at this:

MARK 10: 23 – 31

This is just one example of how there was an overwhelming promise of joy in His call to be His disciple.

Jesus once described the way of life He taught and showed as new wine which would explode the old wineskins of traditional, formal, outward, graceless religion. In His parables about the Kingdom he gives images such as a wedding feast – the ultimate in joy and celebration – or like finding priceless treasure – something that is worth giving everything up for.

And here he tells his disciples that any sacrifice we make for the kingdom will be rewarded even in this present life , but note what he told them and us- “and in the age to come eternal life”.

This is the key if we are to persevere and grow as a disciple of Christ. Jesus throughout His teaching focused on eternity and we must – in all things – have an eternal perspective to make sense of the present. We live our day to day lives in the real world of course – but we live knowing that there is the much bigger picture and perspective which is eternity.

So, to sum up this first talk in our series.

Discipleship is responding to the call to follow Christ – and that call involves obedience and the call to be prepared to suffer for Christ.

But the reward is ultimately an eternal one which puts any suffering and sacrifice on our part in the now into perspective.

I began this talk with the quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his book “The Cost of Discipleship”.

What makes his writing about discipleship so captivating is that as he wrote so he lived! His obedience proved to be very costly – his calling to follow Christ in war time Germany and opposing the Nazi’s eventually led to his imprisonment and execution at the age of 37. But he knew the certainty and assurance of life eternal – and that was manifest and shone out as he faced the ultimate test of death itself:

READ FROM BONHOEFFER BOOK – ACCOUNT OF PRISON DOCTOR WHO WITNESSED HIS EXECUTION.

When Bonhoeffer declared “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ” he certainly understood what Jesus was calling any disciple of His to.

We need to reflect on these words and heed them – for it is possible to have a Christ less Christianity – that is a profession of Christ without actually following Christ – which is something that is ultimately empty, loveless and lifeless.

I am presuming that we don’t want that – I am presuming we want a living faith – that we are committed to Christianity WITH Christ.

If so – let’s be prepared to learn afresh at the start of this year what that actually means and entails. But fasten your safety belts – for one thing this series should not be is comfortable!

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS:

1. The talk began with the quote from Bonhoeffer’s “The Cost of Discipleship”

“Christianity without the Living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ”

Discuss!

Why is “Christianity without discipleship” a tempting option for us all?

What does it lead to – and how can we guard against it happening to us?

2. Read Mark 1: 16 – 20

Why do you think Simon, Andrew, James and John responded to this call so remarkably (“At Once”)?

What is unique to them in this passage – and in what ways may we apply to our situation?

3. Read Mark 3: 13 – 18.

What strikes you about the 12 Jesus chose?

How does this passage give insight as to the nature of the Kingdom that Jesus sought to establish here on earth?

4. Mark 8: 23 – 31

In response to Peter's complaint that he had left everything to follow Jesus he was told there would be a reward in the here and now in that he would receive a hundred times as much as he had left.
What do you think Jesus meant?

Jesus also significantly added "and in the age to come eternal life..."
Is discipleship meaningful – indeed possible – without this perspective?
What causes us to lose this perspective – how can we guard against doing so?