

As you know we had planned, during Lent, to follow a sermon and study series, in conjunction with St Mark's Golden Grove, on the theme of Discipleship. That plan has been messed around a bit by Covid close contact requirements, but we can make a start today on what's left of the series.

I have a bit of a confession to make. As I began to think about this series on Discipleship, I found myself wondering 'Why does this topic sound so dull?' I'm not sure if it sounds dull to you but it did to me. I think the topic is important, but it didn't immediately whet my appetite, I didn't find myself thinking 'Now there's something I want to know more about!' (Even though I think I should want to know more about it.) So then I began to ask myself why this is. And I think I have the answer!

I think that, for a few reasons, it's possible for us to lapse into thinking about discipleship as a kind of duty. And that which is done out of duty is not usually all that exciting – it's called duty because it's something we don't enjoy doing, but it has to be done, so we grit our teeth and get on with it.

Let me explore this a bit with you. Our topic today is 'Discipleship means teaching as Jesus taught.' Our Gospel reading records the final command of Jesus to his followers to 'go and make disciples . . . teaching them all I have commanded you.' As I've written on the front of the pew slip, this is an important command, and it should receive more emphasis than it does in the life of our dear old Anglican church. But, *without any background*, it could sound a bit like a duty – something we don't enjoy doing but which has to be done.

Now, of course, actually there is a great deal of background to that final command of Jesus, and as I was trying to think how to sum that up, I was taken from the final command of Jesus back to his first announcement of his mission.

Mark records Jesus announcing his mission in this way (at 1.14):

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Matthew's account is very similar, although Matthew uses the term 'kingdom of heaven' instead of 'kingdom of God' – and in fact does so throughout his gospel, probably because of certain sensitivities among the Jewish Christians for whom he was writing. But where you read kingdom of heaven in Matthew, you will read 'kingdom of God' in Mark and Luke.

Jesus doesn't explain what he means by the kingdom of God. It's the subject of the good news that he's announcing and which he calls people to believe, but he doesn't explain it – he assumes his listeners will know what it means, and by and large his original listeners would have known. The problem is that, by and large, we don't!

Luke, writing for a non-Jewish audience, like us, provides a poetic picture of the Kingdom of God when, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announces the beginning of his ministry by reading from the book of Isaiah (Luke 4.18-21)

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Luke goes on to record, ²¹ . . . Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus is reading from Isaiah 61, 1-2 which provides an image of the new possibilities that will open for humankind in the new age that would dawn when God's chosen one, God's messiah,

enters human history. The shorthand term for this new age and the blessings it would bring was 'the kingdom of God', and this shorthand was used because the authority and power of God would be established in a new way, by the Messiah whom God would send. In saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus is claiming that he is the one who will bring the blessings of the kingdom, he is the one who has inaugurated the new age of God's blessing.

In trying to sum up how the kingdom of God could be expressed in a way we can understand, John V. Taylor, the Anglican theologian and former Bp of Winchester said, 'The kingdom of God promises the healing of things.'

If we translate that into Jesus' announcement of his ministry in Mark we get, 'The healing of all things is at hand, repent and believe the good news.' And Jesus is clearly saying he is the one who will inaugurate the healing of all things.

Now, in the light of all this, I want to suggest a definition of discipleship that we might engage with, not as a duty but as a joy. Discipleship, I want to suggest to you, might be understood as participating in the healing of all things as we join with Jesus in his mission.

I mean, get that, we frail human beings are invited by God to participate in the healing of all things as we trust in Jesus and follow him. Discipleship then, involves learning what that means and how we are to go about it. And I find that exciting; and challenging, and creative and fulfilling and a bit scary. But it's not dull!

St John, in his gospel, tends to talk about 'eternal life' rather than the Kingdom of God, but here the traditional translation tends to trip us up. You see the phrase usually translated 'eternal life,' if translated literally would be 'the life of the age' and it refers to the life of the Kingdom. Eternal life is not something that believers get when they die, on the contrary, it is a quality of life to be experienced here and now as we trust in Jesus. To be a disciple is to enter into this

new life, the life of the kingdom, with all of its blessings and responsibilities, and to do so day by day, more and more, as we follow Jesus. In St John's terms then, discipleship is participating in the eternal life, the life of the kingdom, day by day. Discipleship means blessing for us, and it should lead to blessing for others.

There's a deeply personal aspect to discipleship. I think it's probably true to say that each of us comes to Jesus somewhat damaged by our life experiences, it varies, of course, from person to person, but each of us comes to Jesus needing some healing, needing to be liberated, perhaps, in some way, from the fetters of the past. At a personal level discipleship means learning from Jesus what it means to be set free by God's love and how then we should live. What this means in practice, I think, is that we need to give quality time to reflecting on the teaching of Jesus as we have it in the Gospels. The letters of the New Testament are important too because there we get the reflection of the apostles on the teaching of Jesus as the early Christians sought to live out their faith. Nor can we neglect the Old Testament because this provides essential background to the teaching of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament. But all of this is not simply 'building Bible knowledge' as it were, but equipping ourselves to be better able to participate in the healing of all things because we're more able to follow Jesus in his mission. The thing is, if we don't keep that end in sight, that is to participate in the healing of all things through following Jesus, Bible study can become a bit of a duty – not very exciting. But if we keep the end in mind, then reflection on God's word becomes an engagement with Jesus, the living Word of God, it's a listening to his instruction, his direction for our lives, his concern for the wellbeing of others.

My hobby is landscape photography. I enjoy reading about landscape photography and watching YouTube videos about how to do landscape photography, not because I can then go and quote chapter and verse of a camera manual, but because it makes me a better photographer. And there's a joy in that. Actually, it's a bit like my discipleship, I think I'm getting better but rather more slowly than I'd like!

If we take seriously the teaching of Jesus, there's one last point we need to emphasise, and that is that, while discipleship begins with a personal participation in the new life of the kingdom, it can't end there. Just as he came to serve, Jesus sends us to serve – he calls us to participate with him in the healing of all things. And at some point, as we serve others in his name, we will need to help those we serve recognise the length and breadth and height of God's life transforming love which is only discovered fully at the foot of the cross. In other words, we will need to obey that final command of Jesus to 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.' But we will see in this command, not a duty, but a privilege and a joy.