

The King and his Disciples

Introduction

Last Sunday I suggested that we could think of this Covid 19 shutdown as a kind of fast. A fast from structures and meetings and activities. And during the fast we could undertake a Spring Clean. In the first place a Spring Clean of ourselves. And in the second place a Spring Clean of our activities and structures.

I suggested there were four areas which could shine a light on our life together before we get to look at our structures.

- We could go back to the start and remember the King and his Gospel, for that is where the church is founded.
- We could go back and look at the King and his disciples, for that will tell us how to live.
- We could go back and look at the King and his Spirit, for there we will find the essential life that determines everything we do.
- We could go back and look at the King and his church, for that will tell us who we are as a body and how we should meet.

Last week I encouraged us to adapt the prayer in Acts 4 in relation to our own telling of the gospel. To pray for boldness to speak and for the Lord to stretch out his hand and do powerful works among us. I urge you to keep on with that.

As you know there has been some discussion and prayer about an associate, assistant, or replacement minister for St Mark's over the last little while. But it may not matter what kind of minister is here. What is needed first is a new congregation. Or a renewed congregation.

Perhaps that is an overstatement. But as we think about the King and his Disciples, I hope we may see things that the Lord wants to change in us as his people.

1. Are We Christians?

Luke tells us that it was at Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11.26). It was a nickname the outsiders gave them. But it

does not seem to have been a name that the disciples themselves picked up and used. It only occurs two other times on the NT. It is used later by King Agrippa (Acts 26.28), when he asks Paul 'Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?'. Peter talks about what to do if you suffer as a Christian (1Peter 4.16). It seems to be a label outsiders used.

Is it a good label? It has broadened its meaning a great deal since those days. Even though it originally marked the believers out as "Messiahites" or "Christianies" (their opponents needed some name to distinguish the new bunch from the followers of other religions), I think there is a better term.

Generally the believers referred to each other as brothers and sisters. But *disciple* was the word that described their relation to their Lord.

2. Disciples of Jesus

And there were lots of them. The Lord Jesus had gathered a group of disciples when he was with them. Even Joseph of Arimathea had been discipled to Jesus (Matt 27.57). After his resurrection Jesus had commissioned all the disciples to go to the nations and disciple them (Matt 28.19).

Disciples were not just followers. They were learners. Practical learners. They followed their teacher around to observe and listen and then to practise what they had been taught. They were a bit like an apprentice. Learning to be like the master, to do like the master and to understand like the master.

They were not casual hearers. Or occasional followers. Being a disciple was not a hobby, or recreation.

You can get the idea from Jesus himself when he spoke to the crowds just after he had told his disciples about his impending death. This is Mark 8.34-35:

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Discipleship begins with a surrender of one's life. Denying yourself means abandoning your control over your life. Peter illustrates what denial means.

But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.' At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept. (Mk 14.71-72).

That was denying Jesus. Denying self is like that. It means putting yourself to death in favour of living Christ's life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it like this:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. (*The Cost of Discipleship*,)

Here is the place to start in our Spring Clean. Whose life are you living? Are you sharing the rule of your life with Jesus? As soon as you say that, you know it is foolish and impossible. Giving Jesus parts of our life and keeping other parts under our say-so is a pretend game. Jesus doesn't call disciples on those terms.

Some, however, feel that that kind of life is for special Christians, and the rest of us can operate on a lower or more casual basis.

But it is not true. There is only one kind of disciple. The kind that is learning from and obeying the master. The one who has no other master than Jesus.

Jesus had some very clear things to say about people who wanted to follow him on their terms. You can read one account of it in Luke 9.57-62. Here is a part of that passage.

To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' 60 But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' 61 Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' 62 Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

It's a wonder Jesus had any disciples. It's a wonder he still does. How come he does? One reason is that discipleship involves a close relationship between master and pupil. Jesus spent time with his disciples, especially the twelve. And they spent time with him. A close relationship developed, such that near the time of his death, he could say to them that he no longer called them servants, but friends (John 15.15).

That is still the starting place. The first half of John 15 gives a wonderful picture of the close connection between Jesus and the disciples. That is the place for us to look if we want to grow as disciples. How encouraging is this personal relationship between disciple and Father Son and Holy Spirit.

There is more of course, some of which we will pick up in future sermons. One is worth mentioning now. When Jesus left his disciples and returned to the Father he said he would send a substitute – another helper – the Holy Spirit. Jesus has disciples in the present because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives bringing the same intimate relationship with Jesus as the twelve had. Is it not wonderful that this is the heart and foundation of discipleship?

3. Disciples Discipling Others

Jesus sent his disciples to the nations to disciple them. They were to make disciples (Matt 28.18-19).

Go therefore 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

And they did. Starting from Jerusalem and spreading out to all the peoples of the world. And many believed the message. Three thousand the first day and each day more and more.

Three thousand disciples. But they were only starting out as disciples. They were truly converted. They had repented, believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. They were complete, lacking nothing in God's eyes. Fully accepted by God because they put their trust in Jesus the Lord as the one who saved them by his death and resurrection.

They were just starting out as disciples, but they were nurtured, taught and helped from the beginning. And their beginning is described in Acts 2.42 like this.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They were together being taught and learning the behaviour of disciples. Not just meeting together but learning how to look after each other as well.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2.44-47

The apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Act 6.4) because that was a major part of discipling the new believers.

Not all discipling happened in groups. After Saul of Tarsus had become a believer Barnabas, the Encourager, took him along to Antioch and ministered together with him for over a year (Acts 11.22-26). Not only was a strong

friendship formed but Barnabas disciplined Saul, who became known as Paul, until Paul became the leader of the mission.

And Barnabas and Paul, in turn, disciplined and taught the new believers in Antioch.

Later when Paul goes on his second missionary journey, he takes Silas with him, picks up Timothy on the way and later adds Luke to his team (Acts 15.40; 16.1; 16.10). Paul is a great example of working with others to teach them, show them how, share the work and then leave them to lead new work themselves.

These glimpses of ministry in the early days of the church give us a picture of how disciples operated. Most were not itinerant. But the practice of disciples being disciplined and then discipling others is clear.

That is the way of Jesus' disciples. Jesus showed the way and the followers followed.

Paul puts it clearly when later on he encourages Timothy to keep on handing on what he had learned.

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; 2 and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. 2 Tim 2.1-2

That is the kind of discipleship I want to encourage. Learning from others who may be further along the track. Passing on to others what you have learned and encouraging them to pass it on to others. Passing on as of first importance, our relationship with Jesus. We do want to help train others in different ministries, in understanding the Bible, in knowing how to be a disciple in the workplace or the public square. But we most of all want to disciple brothers and sisters into a lively and Spirit-filled relationship with Jesus.

5. Disciples Now

As we engage in our Spring Clean, what do we need to attend to?

1. Have you taken up your cross and put yourself to death so that Christ alone can rule in your life. Are Paul's words in Galatians 2 now and always true of you :

I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Gal 2.19-20

2. Have you put yourself in the place where someone else can teach and show you how to follow Jesus? Perhaps in a small group, maybe in a prayer triplet, maybe meeting one on one to read the Bible and pray.

3. If you are in some kind of ministry team are you being helped to learn how to minister better as a servant of Jesus? Could you grow as a Spirit-filled worker?

4. Can you draw someone alongside you to share Jesus and the scriptures with them or to encourage them in their life and ministry?

5. If you are in a ministry of some kind, can it be shared? Can you share it by showing someone else how it is done, and then handing it on to them?

This latter matter reveals one of the bottlenecks in growing disciples. The unwillingness or inability to train up ministers and hand over ministry. Has your ministry become "your" ministry? Could no one else do it? Could it be multiplied or shared? Could the Lord call you on to another ministry? Of course others may not do it as well as you. But they might grow in to it and do it differently. Or contrariwise, are you reluctant to take on a ministry because someone else we know does it or might do it, much better. See 1 Corinthians 12.14-26.

6. Disciple-making is still the main activity of disciples. Keep on telling the gospel. Pray people will come to believe in Jesus. Then teach them how to be disciples.

7. Having said all that you may consider getting equipped for disciple-making. Perhaps in a Ministry School later in the year.

6. So

At the beginning I suggested that what we need is a renewed congregation. By which I mean disciples of Jesus who are learners, apprentices, servants. Disciples who are growing to know Jesus more and more intimately. Who are serving Jesus whole-heartedly in the power of his Spirit. Who are learning from one another. And who are passing it on to others. And who are not distracted, entangled, double-minded or trying to serve two masters. But are dead to themselves and alive to Christ.

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