

Sunday 27th June 2010 – Pentecost 5 – Rev David Thiem

Theme: “Difficult Discipleship”

Introduction

In Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry, the journey through Galilee is now finished and Jesus ‘sets his face’ towards Jerusalem. He is resolute, single minded and prophetic in the manner of Moses and Elijah with whom he had conversed earlier in the chapter during what we call “The Transfiguration” (Lk 9: 28-36).

Yet Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the Messiah.

In today’s text Jesus begins in earnest to prepare his disciples for what lies ahead. The tone is sober. Jesus has already begun to warn his disciples that he will be betrayed and put to death (Lk 9: 21-22 & 44). Partnership with Jesus in his mission will require rugged commitment. The disciples must learn how to respond to rejection and persecution. To be a Christ-follower is to walk the way of Jesus regardless of outcome.

Story

I had never specifically considered the demands of discipleship until a man started coming to church in one of my early ministry parishes who had absolutely NO background in the Christian faith at all. He had married a lady who was a strong Christian and he decided that he needed to know more about this Christian ‘stuff’. So Phil began attending church and some Bible Study groups. In time he made a personal commitment to Christ which really challenged him.

We had opportunities to talk about ‘what it meant to follow Jesus for him’ and I share a little of what I remember.

Phil said that before he was a Christian he had been a womaniser, unfaithful in several marriage relationships which ended in disaster (surprise, surprise!) because of his philandering. He was a salesperson who could sell most things to most people, whether they needed it or not. He had no conscience and no sense of right from wrong. Rather his philosophy was ‘I’ll get the most out of as many people as I can to benefit myself.’ Having become a Christian he learnt about faithfulness in marriage which transformed his own relationship. He learnt about caring for others which changed his sales pitch. He learnt about not taking advantage of others for your own gain to mention just a couple of the monumental changes in his life. This was all part of his growing walk with Jesus.

As you can imagine it wasn’t an easy road for Phil. One day he said to me quite strongly, “If I’d known being a Christian was this difficult I’m not sure I ever would have become one!”

While it was said half in jest, there was a serious edge to his words. He had rightly picked up the thrust of the Gospel for today. Jesus makes it clear that following him has a cost factor to it that cannot be ignored.

Middle

In the first part of today's Gospel it is evident that Jesus' disciples were shunned and rejected in the Samaritan village and they got angry. Then their anger got to the point of wanting 'payback' big-time. James and John, known as 'the sons of thunder', wanted Jesus to destroy these people with fire just as Elijah had called down fire from heaven against the prophets of Baal. This request earns a sharp rebuke from Jesus towards them but leads to a series of conversations on discipleship.

This raises the question: "How do we feel when our faith is rejected by others or we are simply 'brushed aside' when we say something about what we believe or why we think a certain way?"

Not easy this question of rejection because of what we believe.

Many of us, myself included, keep our faith mostly to ourselves often for fear of rejection.

It's a conversation stopper when I meet new people socially and they ask me 'What do you do?' and I reply 'I'm a Uniting Church clergyperson'. Sometimes you get a reply 'Yes, well I went to church once' or 'I went to Sunday School for a while' but rarely does that lead to a faith conversation! My son, when asked what his dad did, used to reply that I was in the Navy and so that was acceptable to his mates. Owning our faith beliefs publicly seems to have become harder in our Australian society as we've become more secular. It certainly is a challenge to know when and where to declare our Christian faith.

Three short encounters between Jesus and would be disciples throw the spotlight on discipleship.

As Jesus and his disciples are going along someone says to Jesus,
"I'll follow you where-ever you go."

Jesus' response seems harsh: "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no-where to lay his head." (Lk 9:58)

We tend to forget that Jesus, for much of his later life was an itinerant teacher and was essentially homeless, apart from the hospitality of others. Also if you had Jesus come to stay, probably you had his assortment of disciples as well (including the sons of thunder!). These words of Jesus are a challenge to us in our materialistic world. It is a reminder that following Jesus teaches us about our stewardship of life and possessions. Both who we are and what we have are ultimately God's! We tend to forget that.

Commitment to discipleship leads to a testing of loyalties on every front. At times the demands of the Gospel will violate familial and cultural norms. We come to the second encounter where Jesus initiates the conversation with the simple words "follow me". In this instance the man makes the excuse "First let me go and bury my father" (Lk 9:59b).

This seems on the surface a reasonable request and Jesus' response appears harsh: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God". (Lk 9:60)

However scholars suggest that the potential disciple may have been referring to the custom to place his father's bones into the ossuary box(funeral box) long after his father's death and was simply using this as an excuse to say "I'll follow you later when I've got all my personal stuff sorted out". To place funeral customs ahead of the call to mission is not on in Jesus' discipling.

The third incident relates again to one wanting to put off following Jesus until they have had a chance to say good-bye to family. Again this seems a reasonably fair request.

Jesus' reply again seems harsh: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Lk 9: 62)

Here Jesus is reminding the people that if you look back when ploughing your furrows go crooked and you lose the way. So it is in discipleship, if you let even your family get in the way you will not follow the straight and narrow, so to speak.

Difficult discipleship – choices need to be made.

Conclusion

However, some of the 'flip-side' of this is seen in our Galatians reading today with the fruits of the Spirit being evidence of some-one who is faithfully following Christ.

Paul states that the fruit of the Spirit is revealed in a person's life as:

Love/Joy/Peace/Patience/Kindness/Generosity/Faithfulness/

Gentleness and Selfcontrol.

These are the gifts of the Holy Spirit that set us free to be Christ's disciples. Hence while we may struggle in some aspects of discipleship we are called to seek the fruits of the Spirit and remarkably this will lead to a more Christ-like life that others can see through the way we live. Choices have to be made as we heard from Phil's story earlier. The road of discipleship is not an easy one and Jesus himself makes that very clear.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it is fine for you to love us; yet you also invite us to love you. It is good for you to serve us; yet you also demand that we serve you. It is one thing for you to speak to us; it is quite another thing for you to embolden us to speak up for you.

Thus we are bold to pray for yet another gift: give us the grace to love, to serve, and to speak for you with boldness and conviction. This we pray in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen