

The Cost of Discipleship

Sermon message at St James Lower Hutt by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, June 30 2019

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 9.51 – 62

Think for a moment if you would to your younger days – what books did you read that impacted on you or helped shape your life?

Each will be different, perhaps ‘Pilgrims’ Progress’, Scott Peck’s ‘The road less travelled’, Jane Austen’s ‘Pride and Prejudice’, Charles Dickens, Tolstoy or ‘The Hobbit.’ Or it could have been poetry as Wordsworth, TS Eliot or George Herbert.

With having a love of creation and travel to remote places, for me ‘South with Scott’ was a classic. Also ‘Sailing alone around the world’ by Capt Joshua Slocum has come to mind.

Then of one’s faith one would think of the Bible – for me early on it was Hurlbutt’s stories of the Bible. there’s unsurprisingly several, including ‘Go Between God’ by Bishop John Taylor, on the Holy Spirit. I remember hearing him speak here at St James on a NZ visit. Agnes Sanford wrote a book combining healing and creation, ‘Creation Waits’. For its time in the 1960’ it was quite prophetic about care of creation.

1) Cost of Discipleship

Another bringing us to the theme of the day and of this sermon was ‘*The Cost of Discipleship*’ by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His was a story of courage and deep faith – and personal challenge – which also this morning’s gospel reading presents. He was born in 1906 and became a pastor in the Lutheran church, theologian, and an anti Nazi dissident. He denounced Hitler’s regime in the 1930’s describing it as idolatrous. After a time in England and the USA he felt called to return to Germany in 1939 to share the trials of his people. He joined the underground resistance movement then in 1943 was arrested by the Gestapo. When in a concentration camp he ministered to prisoners and guards alike. He was executed in 1945 just before the liberation by the Allies.

Wikipedia notes ‘his writings on Christianity’s role in the secular world have become widely influential, and his book ‘Cost of Discipleship’ written in 1937 has been described as a modern classic’. Another was ‘Letter and Papers from prison.’ A prayer written while there: ‘O Holy Spirit, give me faith that will protect me against despair, from passions and from vice, give me such love for God that will blot out all hatred and bitterness, give me the hope that will deliver me from fear and faintheartedness.’:

Time doesn’t allow for more than three short quotes:

He had described God as ‘ the beyond in the midst’.

‘The most direct way to others is through prayer.’

And ‘*discipleship means* allegiance to the suffering Christ, and therefore it is not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact it is a joy and a privilege, and a token of his grace.’ (Brave words indeed.)

2) Lessons in discipleship.)

This morning’s gospel reading is a challenge in our being disciples of Jesus – one commentary headed it ‘*Lessons in discipleship.*’ There’s some four lessons – they relate to Jesus day yet also to our context.

1) The first is avoiding *judgmentalism*. Jesus was focussed on getting to Jerusalem but had to pass through Samaritan territory. Disciples James and John saw that Jesus was not being accepted. They suggested violent action and didn't show Jesus' way of love. They still had more to learn in not being judgemental toward others of a different faith. That's a real issue in today's world. And if there's good that came out of the mosque shootings its prompted action and working towards a sense of cooperation with ones of different faiths, in a local context. Praise God for the goodwill of the recent meal gathering of St James folk and the Muslim community in the Hutt.

2) *Counting the cost:*) Then in the gospel story three questions were addressed to Jesus about implications of being a follower. Luke has grouped some resolves of would-be followers of Jesus. The first one suggests a voice of strong resolution 'I will follow you wherever you go.' To which Jesus responds, paraphrased, 'have you thought what it means to leave your home comforts and follow me'. There was *a need to count the cost*. It seems the man hadn't and that stopped him from following Jesus. Jesus was well aware that his followers might have to suffer and be persecuted and find the going difficult. This can be for believers today also especially in environments where there is little support and active opposition for being Christian. We might note that some of our mission partners serving in Asia only go by their Christian name because of possible retribution.

3) *Determining priorities:* To another was given the chance to do something which would last forever, namely to serve and follow Jesus. But the man said, 'Sir I will follow you, but first..... This suggests some things were more important, 'then I will respond to this call'. In this respect it seems to me about priorities, and better to follow words of Jesus: 'Strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well. ' That's been my experience in life, first serving God in the church context, and getting to enjoy travel and appreciation of the beauty of God's creation. How do you determine priorities in living?

4) *Having conviction:* The third man says, 'I will follow you Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home. 'That would seem a reasonable request. I'm reminded of Jesus rather shocking the first disciples. St Mark tells how Jesus had been spending time ministering in Capernaum. Then he goes out early in the morning ('while it was still very dark') for a time of prayer with his heavenly Father. He returns and the disciples are looking for him. 'When they found him they said, 'Everyone is searching for you'. Jesus answered Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.'(2.35ff).

In being Christian, there is an imperative of work needing doing, proclaiming the good news of the gospel. The task always lies ahead. Disciples of Jesus need to look forward, and have conviction in that resolve.

3) What's important in this is the way Jesus points *how to proceed*.

He doesn't reject James and John, nor the would-be three followers. What I notice in Jesus' teaching is he sets a standard and it may scarcely be achievable – as 'Be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect'. What Jesus gives is *a sense of direction* and one also has the choice where and how to follow. This morning's gospel suggests that for each in our following Jesus the options are different, and it's for us to respond bearing in mind our circumstances. Think back to those books that influenced us.

Concluding, when preparing this sermon I came across a short prayer of opportunity in today's message:

'Move us - from fear to courage, from disdain to kindness, from inertia to action.'

So also the Collect Prayer of the Day has a sense of resolve of one's calling as a Christian, 'that those who follow your Son may do so without condition or compromise, in the assurance of faith and loving compassion.'

