

Knowing, Showing and Sharing God's Love

Discipleship Pt2

Over the past five weeks of our sermon series, we have been looking in much more depth about our mission statement of Knowing, Showing and Sharing God's love. Those three easy to understand descriptions of Knowing, Showing and Sharing are underpinned by three very well-known basic Christian principles of worship (knowing), fellowship (showing) and discipleship (sharing). So far, we have covered worship, the thing which puts God at the centre of our lives. Fellowship, the thing which makes us part of the body, rather than being independent individuals. And the last thing we've been looking at is discipleship, the thing which puts all our faith, worship, fellowship and understanding into action.

So what is discipleship? Well, I'm sure you won't be surprised to know that the word disciple shares its roots with the word discipline. The words disciple and discipline come from the same word meaning 'student' or 'follower'. That's certainly true of the disciples of Jesus we hear about in the gospels. A group of 12 ordinary men becoming followers and students of Jesus' teaching. They followed him around for three years, they hung on to his every word, they heard Jesus talk about a new way of living and a new way of loving. They committed their lives to

learning and growing, to become more like Jesus. And for us, that's the first priority of being a disciple, to learn, to grow, and to become more like Jesus.

The beginning

From the very beginning, God's plan has been to make you like his son, Jesus. God reveals this intention in the creation when in Genesis chapter 1: 26 he says, "*Let us make human beings in our image and likeness.*" In all creation, only human beings are made in God's image, no other living creature has that characteristic. And the Bible says that all people possess the image of God, but that image is incomplete and has been damaged and distorted by sin. So God sent Jesus on a mission to restore the full image that we have lost. So, it's God's ultimate goal for us to become more like Christ, to be disciples by growing and transforming into the likeness of Christ, and therefore the restoration of God's image within us.

Sadly, millions of Christians grow older but never grow up. They remain stuck in perpetual spiritual infancy. It's what I call a 'Noah's Ark' understanding of God, where people know the big stories of the Bible, possibly from their childhood, but they have never grown up beyond that understanding of God. And the reason they have never grown up, is that they never intended to

grow. Spiritual growth is not automatic. It takes intentional commitment. You must want to grow, decide to grow, make an effort to grow, and persist in growing in your faith.

Commitments

Nothing ever shapes your life more than the commitments you choose to make. Your commitments can develop you or they can destroy you, but either way they will define you. Tell me what you are committed to, and I'll tell you what you will be in 20 years. We all become whatever we are committed to and that includes a commitment to learn, to grow, to be transformed and to be more Christlike. One of the reasons why I think homegroups are so essential for a church is because they provide its members an opportunity to make a solid commitment to intentional growth. Christians don't grow on their own, neither do they ever grow by just listening to a sermon on a Sunday. Homegroups provide safe space where people learn from each other and nothing else in a church environment compares to that level of growth and teaching. But homegroups are also good because they require that commitment to the group, commitment to fellowship, commitment to one another and a commitment to learn from one another.

In Bryony's sermon about fellowship, we heard that members of the church are not individuals, but parts of the body and if one part of the body is missing the rest isn't functioning properly. And that's the same in our commitment towards homegroups and intentional spiritual growth. The body only grows into maturity if each and every part grows alongside with it, and growth is an essential factor in God's plan for the whole of creation. Everything grows, I don't know of anything in all of creation that doesn't grow, but in order for things to grow, you have to feed it. As a Christian and a disciple, it is always your own responsibility to feed yourself and to grow, no one else will do it for you, and so you have to find a way to feed yourself with the spiritual food needed for growth. There are not many times in my life when I have not been part of a Bible study group, a homegroup or fellowship group, but those few times have been the times of my least growth and the times of my greatest spiritual dryness.

Serving

By growing we become transformed, we become more like Christ, and in becoming more like Christ, we begin to think less about ourselves and more about the purpose to which God has called us. You weren't created just to consume resources – to eat, breathe and take up space. God designed you to make a

difference with your life. You were created to add to life on earth, not just to take from it. God wants you to give something back, to serve him and to serve others. Being a disciple isn't just about being a follower of Jesus. In becoming Christlike we learn to serve others in the same way that Jesus came to be the servant of all. Unfortunately the world defines greatness in terms of power, possessions, prestige and position. If you are in a position where you can demand service from others, you have arrived. In our self serving culture with its me-first mentality, acting like a servant is not a popular concept. Jesus, however, measured greatness in terms of service, not status. God determines your greatness by how many people you serve, not how many people serve you. This is also true of the church. A famous quote from the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is: *"The church is the church only when it exists for others, not dominating, but helping and serving."* In other words, the church isn't here to serve me, it is here for the primary reason of serving others on behalf of God. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer certainly knew what it was to be a servant of God, he was executed in a Nazi concentration camp for constantly speaking out against Hitler's atrocities.

Being a servant and serving others is so contrary to the world's idea of greatness that we have a hard time to understand it.

The disciples argued about who deserved the most prominent position, and 2000 years later, some Christian leaders still jockey for position. It's sad to say it's something I have witnessed in the Anglican church, and even in our own diocese. Thousands of books have been written on leadership yet very few on servanthood. Everyone wants to lead; no one wants to be a servant. But to be like Jesus is to be a servant. That's what he called himself.

The Crown

One of the best examples of servanthood I have seen recently, although you might be quite surprised to hear it, is in the television series on Netflix called the Crown. Has anybody seen it? It is the story of our own Queen Elizabeth, a drama based on the life of the Royal family from just before the coronation. It may be an unlikely story for the example of servanthood especially when the Queen has such a privileged position. Yet, the whole drama revolves around the great integrity of the Queen's desire to be the servant of the people. There's a number of examples where she has to make some very difficult decisions, decisions which will make her unpopular, even with her own family, for the sake of others.

In that moment of her coronation, as the Crown was placed on her head, our Queen took upon herself a great responsibility. It's a responsibility where sacrifices have to be made. It's a responsibility where the service of others takes precedence over thinking about herself. Whilst I wouldn't dare compare myself to the Queen, I do remember at my ordination something of that sense of the weight of responsibility. As the Bishop laid his hands on me and then moved on to the next candidate, at that point we were all given a New Testament and stuck out of the top was my licence. As I looked at it I remember feeling really flushed, not with pride, but my heart beating heavily in my chest and I felt somewhat ill as this huge sense of responsibility suddenly hit home. Of course I knew what I was doing, but that didn't take away the sense of responsibility which came with it.

Disciple

As Christians, as that crown of Christ's glory is placed upon our heads, we all take on this huge responsibility of being a disciple. Following Jesus does come with a health warning and if you have missed it here it is: Matthew 16:24-25 Jesus says; *"If anyone wants to follow me, they must forget self, take up their cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save their own life will lose it; but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."* In other words the cost and responsibility of being a Jesus

follower is huge. It means a life given in sacrifice, it means surrender, the denying of self, and a whole burden of responsibility. Sadly many Christians forget this and they misinterpret Jesus' promise of the abundant life to mean perfect health, comfortable lifestyle, constant happiness, the full realisation of your dreams, and an instant relief from problems through faith and prayer. In other words, they expect the Christian life to be easy. But this self-absorbed perspective simply treats God like the genie in the lamp who simply exists to serve you and the selfish pursuit of personal fulfilment. God is not our servant, and if you fall for the idea that life is supposed to be easy, either you will become severely disillusioned you will live a life in denial of reality. Jesus did not die on the cross just so we could live comfortable, well-adjusted lives. His purpose is far deeper: He wants to transform us, to make us like himself before he takes us to eternity.

Being a disciple of Christ, taking up our cross and following him, means there is, for all of us, a burden of responsibility. Some of which comes in the giving up of our time. Time needed to worship God, time needed to share in fellowship with us, and time needed in service to others. This burden of responsibility also includes the using of the gifts that God has given us, those unique characteristics which make us all different. The God

given gifts and skills which build up the body Christ, and helps us to grow in his likeness. Being a disciple of Christ means that we also have a responsibility towards the blessings that God has given us, including our finances. And that's the responsibility of paying for the benefits we receive from being a part of a church and to help us to reach out in service to others.

You know, I'm one of those people who always try to be rational in my thinking. I have one of those minds which is logical, like to think things through. I like to plan, to dot the 'I's and cross the 'T's. When I make decisions I often think with my head rather than my heart. And so when I think about what it takes to be a disciple of Christ my head tells me it makes no sense at all. My rational understanding makes me believe that no one in their right mind would take on any of this burden of responsibility. It doesn't make sense to be a servant, it doesn't make sense to be burdened, it doesn't make sense to give up my time, it doesn't make sense to give away money to the point at which it hurts. It doesn't make sense to be committed towards being transformed into the likeness of Christ. And for me personally, it doesn't make sense to give up a well paid job. It doesn't make sense to leave my family and friends and make a new life wherever God has called me.

When I think about all this stuff rationally. It doesn't make sense to give all this to a God that I cannot see. Yet none of this stuff comes from my head, if it did I would have walked away years ago. So, what drives me to take on this huge burden of responsibility? What drives me to take up my cross and follow him?

Well quite simply the answer is, it doesn't come from my head, it comes from my heart. Everything that drives me to do this irrational thing called discipleship comes from in here. It comes from my relationship with God, to love him and from my desire to want to love him more Without my heart and love for God, none of this makes sense, but by knowing God in the way I do, it all makes perfect sense.

Jesus said: *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*