

Sermon for 24th February 2010
Making Disciples
Lent 2 (Philippians 3:17-4:1 and Luke 13:31-35)

'Burghfield, Burghfield ... how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' I wonder how that makes you feel about our mission and ministry here?

Jesus' earthly ministry was all about drawing people closer to God: giving them glimpses of His kingdom; showing what God's transforming power could do; and showing people what they should do to get themselves facing God again.

An essential part of that ministry was building a group of followers to carry on that work after he had gone. And so one of Jesus' central commands, right at the end of Matthew's gospel, is 'Go ... and make disciples of all nations.' It's so important it's got a title: 'The Great Commission'. Jesus gave that command to his disciples and we inherit that same command in this generation: 'Go ... and make disciples of all nations ... baptise them ... and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matt 28:19-20).

So, an indispensable part of our work as Christians is to make disciples, and that's why it is the second of the five strands of our vision. It has two parts: going out and making new disciples; and the building up of us, the church, so that we ourselves are good disciples.

So this morning I want to pick out three things:

- Make some observations about this world where we are called to make disciples;
- what our reading says about making disciples;
- comment on our expectations about disciple-making.

Discipleship involves us taking God into a world that is increasingly secular and not very open to God. I have been blessed to see a few different areas of the world and it seems to me that as a society becomes more sophisticated, its people become more independent, and they feel less and less need for God. In a society like ours we can be very independent: educated; comfortably well-off; well fed; sleep safe in our beds at night; go where you want when you want; have decent healthcare when you get sick; technology means we can control much of our lives through a computer screen. And that describes most of us most of the time.

So if you can run your life on your own, why ever would you need God? And this can make us very worldly, selfish even. But this is the world in which you and I are called to be disciples.

For Christians, a danger of worldliness is that we can forget that everything comes from God. We think and behave like it's ours, but it's not – it's all God's. In the book of Job, God spends several chapters telling this to Job. My Lent book spoke of it like this:

'The call to discipleship is a rescue for the worldly, who have the right map, as it were, but are trying to read it upside-down. Turning it round replaces God as the primary object of our desire and [puts] everything else ... into their true status as gifts'.

Everything and everyone that we have is a gift – a gift from God. So as we go about making disciples, in all our work we must be confidently and resolutely holding the map the right way up, with God at the top. That gets our priorities right, and it also makes us strangely attractive to others.

So what does our reading say about the work of making disciples? Our first reading, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, has useful advice on how we should be, particularly in the face of worldly people. Paul says:

'... join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us' (3:17).

Straightforward advice: observe and imitate good examples of Christian living. Paul recognised a fundamental human truth that people copy one another's habits very well. Modern-day psychologists call it social learning theory – but it's the same thing.

Of course you have to copy the right habits, but Paul and his followers were themselves first-hand imitators of Jesus. We no longer have eye-witnesses of Jesus, but we do have the gospel accounts which tell us a great deal about our ultimate model for imitation – Jesus – which is why we need to study the gospels and all of the bible, to make sure we're holding our maps the right way up.

Nevertheless, we need to apply our discipleship to our world at this time. We are mistaken if we think our world is the same as it was 40, 20 or even 10 years ago. We need to constantly seek out examples of modern Christian living – people who have clearly got their maps the right way round – observe them, rub up against them and imitate them.

This is where 'small groups' fit into our vision. You can't achieve this stuff through sermons and Sunday morning worship – we need to meet and study and discuss in small groups, where we can explore things for ourselves a bit – not just sit listening like you are (hopefully) doing now! The next opportunity for this is at the Rectory, this Thursday evening. And then, we can go out into the world with more confidence that we've got the right map, the right way up.

Finally I want to talk about the need for persistence in making disciples. Remember that people turned away even from Jesus. He healed ten lepers and only one said thank-you (Lk 17:11-17). He gave much-needed advice to the rich young man (a classic case of an upside-down map), who went away sad (Mt 19:22). And in the end the authorities executed Jesus for his trouble.

In the process of making disciples, we will imitate good examples of Christian living, we'll live them out each day as best we can. God will give us opportunities to befriend people, share Christian kindnesses, joy, restraint and the occasional Word with the people we meet. We will share with them something of the power of the Holy Spirit that sustains us. We'll do this in our personal lives, and in our church lives through baptisms, marriages, funerals, messy church, social events and Sunday by Sunday. And they will see glimpses of heaven, and if we're doing it right, people will turn toward God, but some will turn away.

But we must not be disappointed if this happens, we will have done our job. Our job is to take God's message to people through what we do as well as what we say, again and again and again. The rest is between God and the person concerned. As Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, people must be willing to accept Christ into their lives: God will not force them and neither should we.

So here are the three things:

- Get your map the right way round - with God at the top.
- Observe excellent Christians
- And imitate them - again and again and again - as Paul says 'Brothers and sisters ... stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Blessings,
Kevin