

What does it mean to be a disciple?

I wrote my sermon Friday and then last night Dr Who had the answer to this question!!

*“Who I am is where I stand
Where I stand is where I fall
Stand with me”*

Last week we talked about how that being a disciple, a student of a teacher like Jesus, means that we need to inhabit the presence, inhabit the space of Jesus. This week Jesus extends this further to help us understand that it isn't just about just about what it takes to be a disciple, but what discipleship means. Maybe discipleship isn't about how we earn the reward of God's love, but rather how we recognise it.

This may seem like a conversation in semantics, and in some ways it is, but it is the difference between being forced to take a stand (even if we do so freely) and coming to our own decision that we take a stand.

I think in one sense it is easier to explore this message as it is played out in today's reading from Genesis, than in the Gospel reading. The passages we are reading at the moment from Genesis are extremely disturbing – especially with 21st Century eyes – but the passage last week about the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and then this week when we hear about the sacrifice of Isaac – are disturbing to any to any generation. This reading has led to much debate by Jewish and Christian scholars over many centuries. Is it a story of an abusive God, a misguided Abraham, religious violence at its worst? Or is it a story of faith and obedience¹?

There are many possible interpretations for this story from Genesis, and throughout history it has been used as an example of faith, and equally used theologically inappropriately – to bring distrust and even violence. But one of the things which can be taken from this account of Abraham's story is about what faith means.

According to the narrative in Genesis, Abraham and his descendants are the means by which God has chosen to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:3). And Abraham has not always proven up to the task (the wife-sister charade, Hagar and Ishmael which we heard last week). At one level, now God needs to know whether Abraham is willing to give up the thing most precious to him in all the world for the sake of being faithful to the God who gave him that gift in the first place. And Abraham passes this most excruciating of tests: “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”² The recount of the story is also told in such a way that it would appear that Abraham, while following God's

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279

instructions, also has faith that God will provide an alternative... but we can only speculate from the context that they may have been the case.

Abraham, like the disciples later, have chosen to follow God's way. This doesn't just involve saying they will follow – but actually following the journey through – or as we spoke of last week – inhabiting the space of God even when it might be uncomfortable or countercultural or even when like Abraham it seems to go against all that you believe is true of God. One theologian put it this way - *The story of the sacrifice of Isaac makes a claim on us: All that we have, even our own lives and those of the ones most dear to us, belong ultimately to God, who gave them to us in the first place. The story assures us that God will provide, that God will be present.*

Over the last two days I have been to two different ordinations. On Friday night I was in Ealing where 8 curates from across the Willesden area were made Priests. They were ordained one year ago and having spent a year as a Deacon, they came to their priestly ordination. Then yesterday instead of going to Ordination of Deacon's at St Paul's Cathedral, I travelled to Canterbury for the Ordination of Deacon's there, where a friend of mine, who has worked harder than almost anyone I know to complete her Theology certificate and be made a Deacon. These services are always very moving, and often overwhelming. There is much pomp and ceremony and tradition, but threading this together in the generous spirit of God who has called these groups of ordinary everyday people to say yes to serving God in a particular way for the rest of their lives.

As I listened, particularly in the Deacon's service I was struck by a line which the Bishop says to the Deacon's. Having read out a long statement on what being a Deacon means the Bishop then says

'We trust that you are fully determined, by the grace of God, to give yourself wholly to his service, that you may draw his people into that new life which God has prepared for those who love him'³.

How are we fully determined, by God's grace, to give ourselves wholly to the ministry to which we are called?

As we have explored over the last few years, in the end each of us is an ambassador for Christ, wherever God calls us to be. But I suspect all of us at times shy away from trusting that God has a job for each of us to do and we need to get on with doing it. In a sense we need to never lose the sense of determination we must have at the moment we take our vows, whatever vows and promises they might be!

At one level it is too easy to know what we believe. It can often be easy to know what we don't believe as well – or even those bits of Christianity which we are uncomfortable with. It takes a great deal of determination to keep living our faith

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/ordinal/deacons.aspx>

day in and day out. But we are called to not lose sight of this. And for this we need to not just about discipleship – we need to know what it means.

I was watching the little people play at My Moves on Friday – thinking about this semantic difference. We have a lot of two year olds who are all trying to work out the world. Sometimes they can see, and even understand what needs to happen – but can't get it to work. There was one little boy who had sat in a red car we have downstairs. He wanted to get out. To do this he knew he had to stand up, and lift up his leg, and he knew he also had to lift out his second leg – and yet the second leg kept getting stuck. He eventually worked out that he needed to take the second leg out first, then the first leg and it would work.

In faith however it is not just about the determination to get our legs in the right place – though that does help – but also what is the motivation. Are we doing it because we feel like we have no choice if this is our faith – or are we doing it because we chose to live-out our faith?

Which brings us back to our Gospel reading. Faith and discipleship are in the end about how we serve God – but are we serving because that's what disciples do – or are we serving because we want to be disciples?

It may not feel like it makes any difference – but it will be the difference in our faithfulness and our determination to be followers – wherever that following might take us. The whole of chapter 10 is about the nature of discipleship and particularly what this was going to be like for those first disciples – though as we have reflected it also has relevance to our own discipleship. And as it draws to a close Jesus reminds the disciples not to get distracted, that it is often the anonymous signs of faith – the small unknown acts that witness most to the love of Christ, rather than any great missionary gesture.

Colin Yukkman⁴ reminded me during the week that *God's mission is as much about the unnamed people who provide a thirsty servant a cold drink of water as the familiar names that dot the pages of church histories. In fact, within the New Testament, we only have one narrative account of the church's mission -- the book of Acts -- and in it we encounter many such "minor" characters. They are minor only in the sense that their contributions to God's mission surely surpass the "air time" they receive: people like Ananias (the good one!), Simon the Tanner, Cornelius, Lydia, Prisca/Aquila, and so on. Their hospitality and social connections were decisive for the spread of the Christian teaching. And yet they get a barely a mention in the history of the early church. This is the gift of the final few verses of Matthew 10 – a reminder that in the end so much of faith is conveyed in the unknown gestures and acts of kindness. Or as one scholar put it - you may not be the ones going, but never forget you too are sent.*

In the end, the inhabiting of our faith – the determination of faith – should inspire us whatever our role to be everyday disciples, those armed with the courage and

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3333

compassion of Christ who go out believing that God is at work in and through all we do, even the smallest acts of kindness and generosity. For it is here that we stand with Christ!

At each of the ordinations we sang the hymn, which we will sing today during the offertory. It reminds us on this call, this commitment to inhabit and to serve. It also reminds us to not lose sight of the one who calls us and in many ways sums up all that Matthew 10 teaches us about discipleship

*In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand⁵ Amen*

⁵ In Christ Alone by Natalie Grant