

Discipleship 15-01-2023

John 1:29-42

The Lamb of God

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The First Disciples of Jesus

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)

Matthew 5:1-16

The Beatitudes

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

- 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Salt and Light

'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way,

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Luke 6:20–49

Blessings and Woes

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

24 'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

25 'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Love for Enemies

27 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Discipleship

What is the problem?

We have a problem in the Church. It's not about declining attendance. It's not about money. It's not about mustering enough people to do the necessary jobs. These are problems, of course -- maybe "challenges" is a better word. But there is a much bigger problem, and it is a Theological problem.

The Theological Problem

Here it is: it is the problem of Grace.

Surely, you might respond, Grace (with a capital G) can't be a problem. Surely Grace is an answer to a problem -- not a cause. Are we not assured that no matter how big or small our transgressions, our gracious God will come to the rescue and forgive us. And, furthermore, we are assured, Jesus died on the cross and rescued us from sin.

The problem is -- the Theological and practical problem is -- that it is all too easy. We are too easily convinced that Grace (with a capital G) is just out there for the taking, and we do not need to do anything much to earn it.

It boils down to a question of discipleship.

We talk a lot in the Church about Discipleship. It's one of those key ideas in our faith. There are few ideas that are more important. And yet, like many of such ideas, when we are challenged we are hard put to say what it is. Here are a few things that might come to mind when we talk about discipleship: and I am going to call on a famous theologian to help us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (about whom I will have more to say later) talks about "Easy Grace" and "bargain-basement Grace"). It is a grace you just pick up -- that you pick up in a hurry. Easy peasy!

Easy Grace. It has come to characterise the modern church, says Bonhoeffer. A no-worries church. A she'll-be-right church. That's how Bonhoeffer saw his church -- our church. And Bonhoeffer said that the bargain-basement church -- the undemanding church -- will have no future. But costly Grace is at the very heart of the Christian life.

What does Costly Grace look like?

But what does a demanding church look like?

What does a church that peddles "Costly Grace" look like?

What does it feel like?

What does it sound like?

What does it act like?

Bonhoeffer's approach

Bonhoeffer tries to answer those questions by an examination of The Sermon on the Mount and The Beatitudes. He offers us a way into those teachings of Jesus that, I think, offers a way into an understanding of them. It seems reasonable to lean on Bonhoeffer here. He was, after all, the person we think of when we want to think about a modern-day martyr. He was executed for his alleged role in the plot to kill Hitler. He was a noted theologian. He had studied and worked in the United States. He then decided to return to Germany on the grounds that he needed to be with the church as it accommodated itself to fascist Germany.

So Bonhoeffer's own discipleship had the following characteristics:

Doing a special job.

Being chosen.

Being called.

Being different.

Being set apart.

Disregard for personal safety

Discipline

A sense of history

A willingness to speak out

Single-mindedness

Steadfastness

Charisma

What makes it last?

Can you stop being a Disciple? How?

Tiredness.

Disillusionment

Alternative opportunities

Lack of skills

Poor leadership

Peer pressure

Institutional breakdown

Jesus and discipleship

The call of the first disciples.

Bonhoeffer's great contributions to the theory and practice of discipleship are to be found in his writings on the subject --. Which are easily found they are easily accessible on Kindle. For me the blinding revelation is that in the sermon on the mount Jesus is talking not to the crowd but to the disciples. The crowd distresses him. He takes his disciples up the mountain and he has a conversation with them. Indeed Jesus seems to make the point that the disciples are different from the crowd. The first point is that the Disciples have been called. We heard the story about that this morning in the gospel according to Luke.

The sermon on the mount.

Let's just listen in. From Luke:

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

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for you have received your consolation.

25 'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

And from Matthew:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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Just a little three-letter word: ARE!

Blessed **are** you who are.....

Blessed **are**...

Note the tense: not were, not will be, are. Now. You .

And remember, Jesus is talking to his closest friends. He is talking to his disciples. These are the guys who walked away from their jobs and their security. The guys who left home. The guys who chose to be homeless. The guys who were called: not because they were special, or uniquely qualified. Their only distinguishing characteristic was that they were called. They heard the call. They dropped their nets. They followed.

And what did they get in return? Poverty. Hunger. Tears. Hatred. Exclusion. Defamation. The same fate as the fate of the Prophets.

And how did Jesus think should they respond?

They behave as if they are citizens of The Kingdom.

They should behave as if that they will be satisfied.

They should behave as if they will be filled.

They should behave as if they are children of God.

Who gets the call?

This is surely one of the big questions. In our version of the church we are accustomed to understanding that ministers are chosen, called, selected, set apart. These people are certified by training and with great ceremony. They are accredited by those who themselves have also been accredited. There is a sort of mystique that attaches to them, and much is expected of them. But the doctrines of the church don't limit this chosen-ness to the clergy. In the small print we will read that we are all potentially chosen. We can all be disciples. We can all join Jesus on the mountainside and hear that we are blessed, that we are salt, that we are light. But here's the rub; we need to be chosen, and we need to be in a frame of mind to be chosen -- to be ready. Not ready, willing and able, but ready, not necessarily able. Ready to drop those nets; ready to give stuff up; ready for the difficult but immensely satisfying life.

Who gets left out?

For the disciples way back then it was not a matter of being qualified or trained. It was a matter of being ready. They ARE blessed, and they are the vehicles of blessing if they are ready to hear the call of their Master. And they do not always get things right, and they are not always faith-full, and they are not even always loyal. They are ready. Bonhoeffer lays it all out; if you are not ready to hear the call. If you can't make yourself drop those nets and follow -- to become fishers of men, then you are not going to be a member of the group of chosen ones on the mountainside, but a part of the crowd down at the foot of the mountain.

The church of easy Grace -- the church of bargain-basement Grace is the church of the crowd. This is the church of the quick fix. This is the church that offers healing and forgiveness just for the asking. Not a lot of disciples in their ranks. Not a lot of fishers of men amongst them. This is a pretend church.

The church of hard Grace is the home of those who are ready; who are ready and willing; who are ready to serve even if they don't know how. The church of hard Grace is where the disciples are; where the blessed are; where the people are who:

Know they are citizens of The Kingdom.

Know that they will be satisfied.

Know they will be filled.

Know they will be children of God

The church of hard Grace is the home of disciples -- the ones who have been called, who have dropped their nets.

What sort of church do we want in Ormond? An easy, comfortable church spiced with a few overworked disciples, or a church that has serious expectations, that hears the call and is ready, a church replete with folk who have dropped their nets and who, regardless of talent, regardless of skill, regardless of training are in the business of fishing for men. All that is necessary is to listen, to hear the call and to follow. Forget about cosy feel-good fellowship. Forget about easy bargain-basement grace. There's work to be done,

May it be so!