

Summer School January 2012

‘Decided and Delighted Disciples’

SESSION 4

Christlike example in suffering

1 Peter 2: 21-25

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To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth’.
When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, he entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

We began our thinking about discipleship with Jesus’ words about Himself and conclude with another striking apostolic testimony (as it turns out to be, from an eyewitness) to Jesus, and specifically of His suffering at the hands of persecutors (who in the main, it must never be forgotten, were from the religious and community establishments). I raise this because persecution and suffering is an expected experience of disciples. This is made plain by our Lord in both the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:10-12) and in His farewell discourse to His disciples in John 15:18-20 (‘If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.’) Note how the ‘if’ of 18 turns into ‘the world hates you’ (19) and ‘will persecute you’ (20).

As disciples of Jesus we are to spread the message of Jesus – we have no option (whether by our deeds, our congregational love, by our readiness to give an account or by intentional preaching and unashamed testimony: Matthew 5:1-15, John 13:34-35; 1 Peter 3:15 and Romans 10, Luke 9:26). This speaking will inevitably invite opposition.

I think it is true to say that we Anglicans are mostly far too polite when it comes to sharing the gospel. The ‘building bridges of friendship’ evangelism has (in my judgement) failed, not because we’ve built bridges, but have not been prepared to risk breaking the bridges with the traffic of the gospel. Ten years ago I urged our parishes to see the moment of enquiry for infant baptism as the opportunity for evangelism rather than a step in the process of building bridges. This has caused some to be upset but I hope has given opportunity for many to be challenged.

Today I encourage you to be unafraid and loving enough to rattle people's cages with the message of Jesus Christ **once** crucified, **unique** and the **only** way to God, who will return to **judge** those who ignore or refuse His gracious overtures. Do not let fear get to you or inhibit you from intentional evangelism. I'm not suggesting we be rude or objectionable but we need to reflect on the calling to suffering. Our brothers and sisters all over the world are experiencing this, in increasing measure. The Barnabas Fund magazine will remind you of this. And they are standing firm.

The New Atheists, so called, are becoming loud in their evangelism, and political correctness under the guise of anti-discrimination is never far away. But disciples must follow their Master and expect opposition. If it is not our experience it may well be because we are neither sharp enough on the centrality of Jesus, of His uniqueness or the coming judgement. The gentleness and respect enjoined upon us by Peter in 3:15 must never be at the expense of logical thinking and a sharpness in regard to clarity about Jesus' centrality, cross and call for repentance. Our words need to be formed so as to hit the hearts of those we speak to.

What we learn as disciples from 23b, 'He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly' is that like Jesus we can trust God when the going gets tough and especially when we find ourselves opposed for cross-centred and shaped ministry. When Jesus was alone on that cross His friends had deserted Him, His foes (no doubt from the religious and Roman establishments) assailed Him with insults and at some point He experienced the hellish separation from His Father (anticipated in Gethsemane and expressed in those harrowing words, 'my God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?'). His death, as we know from the other passages in 1 Peter at 1:18; 3:18, bought our redemption and free access to God. But there will be times when disciples might feel forsaken.

Our Lord's example (the word used is that of a model to be copied, e.g. of handwriting) becomes very precious for us in that we can always entrust ourselves to Him, since in the area of unjust criticism and actions, He can be relied upon to judge justly. And Jesus knew that he could trust His Father because of their relationship and the Father's purposes which Jesus was involved in accomplishing. Disciples of Jesus are similarly in that most intimate relationship with God, as adopted sons and daughters, filled with God the Spirit and engaged in accomplishing God's purposes of preaching and living Christ crucified – as examples in our time and in rescuing straying sheep (25).

What does this mean for us? Let me suggest the following:

- We can always trust God even when we are being unjustly treated. He knows, He sees, He sustains and He honours His children. 'Never doubt in the dark what you have learned in the light', and 'When we cannot trace God's hand we can truly trust His heart' (Spurgeon) are true. The wise disciple will be disciplined to daily read and meditate upon the Scriptures in general and our Lord's example (in the gospels and the Supper) in particular.
- Fellowship, as good as it can be and important as it is to be worked at, will often fail us and cannot be available to us at all times. Therefore disciples must cultivate this Godward reliance that we see in Jesus. Only God will never fail nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5) and only God can fully understand us, only God can be with us when

we are alone (whether awake at night, confused, shedding tears, afraid or distraught). There has been a great recovery over the past 45 years of the importance of fellowship and the benefits have been good; however it has, I believe, left us with significant weaknesses in regard to handling the tough aspects of discipleship. We tend to want to talk to each other before we fall to our knees and talk to God and we tend to expect too much from one another and not enough from God.

In our Lord's case there was no one else. It was not that He didn't value friends (He invited the disciples to pray with Him in Gethsemane but they firstly slept and then, with the exception of the women, deserted and denied Him) but it was God alone to whom He could entrust Himself. Disciples must be resilient. Not only are we to persevere to the end (Matthew 24:12-13) but we will be opposed, even persecuted. Our fellows will prove great encouragers, and as part of our discipleship we are to work hard at this support and example, but it is God alone whose faithfulness will be sufficient in sustaining us when the chips are down, when we are alone or in difficult circumstances or personal struggles with temptation that we cannot share.

Expressed another way, the cross has two arms, one vertical and the other horizontal; we need to derive strength from both God and our fellows, but God must have the priority. Otherwise we will not be able to stand in persecution, temptation and sadness; we will find our fellowship assuming a priority above our worship and becoming too human-centred and we will be robbing ourselves of direct and intimate fellowship with God Himself, which will mean at the end of the day we have less to offer each other in our fellowship. Having rid ourselves of any priestly intermediary (at the Reformation) between ourselves and God we could find ourselves only able to access God through our fellows(hip). A gracious gift from God of supportive brothers and sisters having become an idol sees us no longer able to serve God or others, since our self-interests have become paramount.

- This trusting, God focused privilege that has sustained and continues to sustain countless Christians through suffering and persecution can only be sustained by disciples who commune with their Lord each day and whose main purpose on Sundays is to worship God. The habitual practice of meeting with God in our daily quiet time (of Bible reading, meditation and prayer) in what might be described as a safe place will ensure that we, like our Lord, will be able to entrust ourselves to God in the unsafe place of persecution, insult and isolation. Disciples must be disciplined. We need to recognise that this is simple wisdom borrowed from any worthwhile pursuit (e.g. music, sport, study, farming, etc.) and that it must not be written off, as it so sadly is, as legalism somehow in opposition to grace. The grace that saves is also the grace that serves, transforms, and never rests until we become more like our Saviour.

Worship must be at the heart of our Sunday services since that is our most fundamental response to God. Jesus remarked that those who are true worshippers 'will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and His worshippers must worship in Spirit and in truth' (John 4:23-24).

You will know that I have afforded your Vicars a certain amount of freedom in ordering our Sunday worship, offering prescribed guidelines rather than insisting on the use of services to the letter. The guidelines include:

- opening sentences of Scripture
- penitential general confession AND declaration of pardon
- two Bible readings (as a minimum)
- a Psalm, a Creed every other week
- common prayers (prayers that are common to all there and in line with big picture matters like government)
- use of Prayer Book prayers for Holy Communion consecration and administration
- hymns of good theology, singable, objective and subjective and (prior to Holy Communion) focusing on the death of Christ.

Our liturgy, the envy of many, by its very design and content takes us upward toward God. There is evidence that many in the under 35 age group are leaving churches with no ordered liturgy to go to churches with a set liturgy, for two reasons: the orderliness and the numinous–transcendent (Godward) focus.

It is this Godward focus of worship (expressed so clearly in the prayer of preparation at Communion, for example) that will foster and grow our ability to persevere and conduct ourselves in a Godly fashion in circumstances of opposition or when we are alone.

In terms of preparation for worship can I commend the call to worship afforded by the exhortation to Morning Prayer (AAPB 19-20) and the placement of Psalm 95 (The Venite) before hearing the Bible readings. I've yet to hear a clearer call to worship and to hearing and heeding of Holy Scripture than these.

Disciples of Jesus rejoice in the grace of God and the fear of God. Both are essential to both sacrificial service and the pursuit of holiness. In both we can be examples to each other as we run the race together.

- We cannot leave this passage without reminding ourselves that our Lord's patient suffering on the cross was to save sinners. Much is being attempted in our parishes to bring this wonderful message to non-Christians (the majority by a long way around about us). In this I rejoice since for many of you this is second nature and drives all you think and do.

I've detected in myself a slowing down in seeking to share the gospel with others. I suspect that a part of the reason may be fear of insult (or our New England polite cold shoulder or wary smile that considers enthusiasm in evangelism as either fundamentalism or an impolite intrusion). But given our Lord's example (2:21) and express purpose (3:18) of 'bringing the unrighteous to God' we must never fear opposition in whatever form it takes, if for no other reason than that it means people have heard us rightly and got the message, viz.:

- they are hell-bound helpless sinners unable to save themselves
- Christ is God's only appointed Saviour whom they must rely upon
line up behind
and give their lives to

if they are to be saved from God's righteous wrath (if not, they will have no second chance after death to avoid hell and are in grave danger of hardening their hearts further)

- we can give ourselves fully and confidently to Jesus as Lord because God raised Him bodily from the grave on the third day and as such
- we look forward with confidence to His glorious return in order to bring in the New Heavens and New Earth where righteousness will be the hallmark (along with joy, rich fellowship and worship).

Will you then keep praying for the unconverted (via the Diocesan Prayer Adventure)
Will you engage in some form of systematic outreach evangelism (e.g. using *Challenge* newspaper) ... going for all comers (the least, the last and the lost).

This is why we are called to be disciples. Could there be any greater way to live our lives than to be saved from hell and to be ambassadors of the only yet so exceedingly rich and gracious Lord and Saviour, so that others too might be saved from such a horrible though deserving eternity?

Application:

1. *Suffering (opposition) should not surprise us (4:12)*

- John 15
- 1 Peter 1:1
- 1:6-7
- 2:12
- 2:18-21
- 3:9 & 12-14
- 3:15-17
- 4:1-6
- 4:12-19
- 5:6-11

2. *We won't go out of our way to incite opposition (3:15)*

3. *As disciples we find delight in opposition since it gives us opportunity to:*

(i) entrust ourselves to God (2:23 & 4:19)

(ii) wean ourselves away from the world's sinful ways (4:1-4)

4. *Trusting God in conflict situations is Christlike (2:21)*

and will: commend Christ (Matthew 5:16)

promote harmony (Matthew 5:9; 38-48)

bring us happiness (Matthew 5:11-12)

be health-giving (Ephesians 4:29-5:2)

Exercise: What will this look like for you?

at home

at church

at work

5. *Three vital ingredients to decided and delighted discipleship*

(i) our calling (2:21)

(ii) our example (2:21)

(iii) our God who can be trusted (2:23)