26/7/20 Sermon for St James, Bolton ‘Church Unleashed as Disciple’ by Rev Steve Lees

This is the last sermon in a series of 7 on ‘Church Unleashed’. I hope this series has helped you to reflect on, & maybe even to rediscover or re-imagine Church… & in particular how God wants to work through the Church to bless the world. Today Church Unleashed as Disciple…

Disciple...I wonder what that word brings to mind? Probably the 12 disciples referred to in the Gospels; perhaps an idea of someone learning from, or following Jesus. There were many ‘disciples’ in the time of Jesus who followed a variety of ‘rabbis’ from whom they learnt the Scriptures and who helped them understand what they meant and how they were to live them out. A phrase sprang up at the time; ‘May you be covered in the dust from the shoes of your rabbi’. A disciple didn’t just sit and listen to a teacher in a classroom, they followed them around and watched how they lived their lives, and copied them; following so closely that their clothes would be covered with dust from their teachers’ shoes. Jesus stood in this tradition but gave it so much more meaning as he taught about the Kingdom of God…but more, he actually brought the Kingdom of God to earth.

The Church, and for our purposes St James in particular, is a community of disciples who are committed to journey alongside one another, learning from each other, encouraging and challenging one another. We are disciples of our ‘rabbi,’ Jesus. So, as we learn from all he has shown us in his life, death and resurrection, we are called to follow him so closely that we would be ‘covered with the dust from his shoes’! The more we are covered with that ‘dust,’ the more the Church will be unleashed as disciple to minister to the world around us.

Have you ever noticed that when you spend a lot of time with someone, you pick up some of their mannerisms, and sayings…you can even begin to think like each other, or anticipate what the other person is going to say? I definitely see that with me and Jane! Likewise, the more time we spend with our rabbi Jesus, the more we pick up his mannerisms, sayings, thoughts…indeed we become more like Him.

The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek word translated to English as disciple, is *mathetes.* As we’ve discovered it means more than a student, it’s more like our word ‘apprentice’. (Except Jesus promises never to fire us! Matt 28:20). Those first 12 disciples or apprentices physically spent time with Jesus, so they had the advantage of being able to see their rabbi, and to watch him and copy him. When Jesus ascended into heaven, they were bereft and couldn’t physically follow him but at Pentecost they received the Spirit who reminded them of everything he had told them (John 14:26). What about the new converts in the early Church who had never met Jesus, how could they *follow* Jesus who was no longer physically present? They had the Holy Spirit to guide them but they had never experienced the physical presence of Jesus. The early Church had to figure out how people who had never met Jesus could be ‘discipled’. Discipled is a verb, a doing word…it implies another word we are familiar with ‘discipline’. That word has a bad image, but I’m using it here in its true meaning from the Latin, which means ‘instruction and training’. As well as the Holy Spirit being their guide, these new converts also needed someone to give them instruction and training. This is exactly the position we find ourselves in. How can we be instructed and trained to follow Jesus & so become more and more like him?

Our reading from Acts 16, can help us. Here Paul and Timothy form a supportive, and effective partnership. Paul had been to Lystra before (Acts 14); he’d prayed for a man lame from birth who was healed. He had preached the Gospel there with Barnabas, before they were both stoned and left for dead! Our passage finds Paul on his second journey about 3 years later, and now there is an established Christian community in Lystra, of which Timothy is a part. Paul and Timothy are both disciples of Jesus but they form a relationship were Paul becomes the rabbi and Timothy spends time with him to be ‘instructed and trained’…to be covered in the dust of Paul’s shoes! Together they travel, preach and build up churches. It’s a great partnership modelled by Jesus, who although he had 12 disciples spent a higher proportion of time with just 3 of them; Peter, James & John. I guess we might refer to this type of relationship as a mentor & mentee. This type of intense personal discipleship can have great benefits, however as flawed human beings such relationships can go wrong, with the danger of manipulation and abuse.

Discipleship can actually start before ‘conversion’. As ordinary Christians we can have a surprising impact on people around us…Jesus leaks out of us even when we don’t realise it! I remember being very surprised meeting someone again after a gap of several years who told me that I was one of the reasons they had become a Christian! However, as Church how good are we at discipling people who are not yet Christian? How good are we at discipling those who are already Christian? We might be tempted to say a course is the answer; Start and Alpha have both had really positive benefits for several people (maybe you’re one of them?) But for ongoing discipleship; ‘training and instruction,’ we need to create other opportunities. Home Groups are one such way, but essentially what it comes down to is the quality of our relationships with each other…as we spend time, journeying together, eating together, laughing and crying together, let’s be intentional. Let’s intend to go deeper together in the relationship that will truly give us strength, sustenance and power…our relationship with Jesus. So, let me ask a question, are our relationships with each other ‘discipling’ us…are we more than a social club? Are we helping each other to become more and more like Jesus?

Paul and Timothy journeyed together, in the model that Jesus demonstrated. Paul was the rabbi and was instructing and training Timothy but he must surely have learnt a lot from Timothy. Even Paul (more so us!) continued to have lots to learn and had room for more growth in becoming more like Jesus. It’s true isn’t it that the more we know, the more we realise what we don’t know!

All of us are in some ways like Paul and Timothy. Can you look back as a Timothy and see who has been like Paul to you? I remember Bob, who helped me so much as a young Christian; spent time with me, & prayed with me. Who is your Paul now? If you haven’t got that person, don’t despair, pray for God to provide. The reality is St James is a fairly small congregation…there are inevitably not enough Pauls. (but perhaps I’m wrong!) But there are so many ways to take responsibility for our own growth. Here are just some: reading the Bible (on your own and/or with someone else…using Bible notes can be helpful); reading Christian books or resources online; having regular times of prayer (again on your own and/or with someone else…prayer triplets have been a great resource in this respect); attending Christian conferences (not physically possible at the moment but google ‘New Wine Breaks Out’ where you can join the conference online this year 30th July to 3rd August); some people find having a Spiritual Director to journey alongside helpful.

It may be easier to see ourselves as a Timothy but I wonder if you can see yourself as a Paul to someone else…is there someone you could come alongside to help them grow more like Jesus? (Maybe you’re already doing that...if not ask God to show you someone…But do be sensitive in how you approach this!)

To finish, I’m reminded of the song ‘Brother, sister let me serve you’. There’s a verse that goes; ‘We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road; we are here to help each other, walk the mile and bear the load.’ That’s particularly true in terms of our discipleship…**you** are not alone, **we** are together…becoming covered in the dust from the shoes of our rabbi, Jesus, & unleashed so that we can be good news for our community. Amen