

Stewardship 1: Disciples. SJC 2nd June 2024

1 Sam. 3:1-10 / 2 Cor. 4:5-15 / Mk. 2:23-3:6

Introduction to series

Did you know that Jesus spoke about money and possessions and wealth more than any other topic? Whether it's camels going through the eyes of needles, or rich young rulers being challenged to give away all they have, this was a topic that Jesus didn't shy away from. Jesus knew that attitudes to money and its use tell us a lot about what is really important to us. I have always thought a bank statement was a moral document, showing me what I really value, as opposed to what I say I value.

I have heard people say, "The church is always asking for money." Let me tell you, I don't think that's true.

For comparison, I am a member of a UK political party. I won't tell you which one, but I will say I have got very used to losing elections over the years. Anyway, there is a UK General Election campaign on right now, as you may have picked up, and literally every day I get multiple emails from my party asking me for money. If you looked at my email inbox you would think that Keir Starmer was my best friend. Oh rats, I think I might have given it away.

Anyhow, by comparison, the Anglican church doesn't challenge us about money very much. But over the next four weeks, I want to help each of us think about our money. I want to call each of us to generosity, to greater participation in the mission of God in the world, and here at St. James' in particular. I absolutely don't plan to send any of us on a guilt trip. Rather I want us to see how faithful and generous stewardship of whatever God has entrusted to us is an important and a life-giving aspect of what it means to be a Christian.

We will do this through four sermons which I will be preaching, through some thought prompts which you can find in Connections, and then through in-person meetings of our Scripture Circle and our Wednesday night Bible study plus four Zoom meetings which you can join if you'd like to reflect on these sermons and themes together. So let's begin.

Introduction to topic

I have entitled this first talk, 'Disciples'. But what does it mean to be a disciple? And does it include us?

When we think about disciples we may think first about the 12, those closest followers of Jesus when he was walking around on the earth. Sometimes we call them the 12 apostles, and we might think that they are the only ones to whom the name 'disciple' applies. But not so. Because in Matthew 28, just before Jesus ascends to heaven, he commissions the 11 who are left to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. So all those who have come to believe in Jesus through the testimony of the 11 and those who came after them is also a disciple. That includes you and I.

But then what is a disciple? It's not a word that we use very much in everyday language. An alternative word might be 'apprentice'. Someone who is learning a craft, a skill, a way of being in the world by spending time with and being taught by someone who is already an expert in that field.

So a disciple of Jesus is someone who has chosen to apprentice themselves to Jesus, to study him, and to seek to be more like him. And in our Bible passages today we learn four things about what it means to be a disciple.

A disciple is someone who responds to the call

You may remember that in the early chapters of the Gospels, we read about Jesus going up to people and saying to them 'Follow me.' And there was something about him, something about that invitation, which meant that hardy, practical, everyday people put down their tools, left their trades, and followed him.

The story of Samuel in the Old Testament begins with a very similar call. We heard it in our first reading. "The Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!', but Samuel, being just a boy, thought that he was hearing the voice of his master Eli. Only on the third time did he recognize the voice of God for what it was and reply: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Samuel lived before Jesus so we can't very well call him a disciple of Jesus. But there are enough parallels in the Gospels to make us confident of this. A disciple of Jesus is someone who has heard a call and responded.

I don't know if you would think about yourself as someone who has heard a call from Jesus, but if you are a disciple, a follower, then that is who you are. Perhaps it came suddenly. Perhaps it came gently and gradually. Perhaps you even sensed a voice. But Jesus called you and invited you to follow him. And the fact that you are here this morning says to me that you said yes, or at least that you want to, are trying to, say yes to that call.

And our response to that call includes using all that God has entrusted to us – our opportunities, our skills and abilities, and yes, our financial resources – according to his will.

A disciple is someone carrying treasure in clay jars

St Paul writes in our second reading, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so it may be seen that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

What does this mean?

Well, the clay jar is something very ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill. And although we are disciples of Jesus, we remain clay jars. We aren't perfect. We aren't all shiny and new. WE carry with us the cracks from the blows that life has dealt us. We Christians are ordinary people.

Yet we carry treasure. Who puts treasure in clay jars? They are fragile, breakable, and mundane. We would put treasure in our grandest, strongest, most beautiful containers. But God puts treasure in clay pots, in you and me. And this treasure is nothing other than the presence and light of God. Paul writes, "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of the darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." As we heard in my Pentecost sermon, the Holy Spirit is God living within us, so we don't just try to be more like Jesus, but we become more like him through the work of the Spirit. That's the treasure. And the evidence is of course whether there is any visible progress towards Christlikeness in us at all.

'Treasure' here is a metaphor of course. But God has also entrusted actual treasure to us – money and possessions. To some of us, he has entrusted a lot. To others, rather less. That doesn't matter. What does matter is how we use whatever treasure has been entrusted to us, whether we use it for ourselves to accumulate and enjoy a comfortable life, or whether we use it for God's purposes. And that leads me to my third point.

A disciple is someone who shares in the mission of God

In 20th-Century theology, there was a recovery of the idea of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. It marked a shift from an emphasis on mission as something we do as the Church to something God does through us. Paul reminds us, again in our epistle reading, of that mission of God.

“Grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

God's mission is about filling the world with his glory, and he does this by sharing his grace with more and more people.

Next week you will receive a brochure setting out some of the ways we want to spread God's grace to more and more people, for example through building a Children's Community Choir which will extend the gift of music to many children in our neighbourhood, building relationships with lots of families. That's God's mission at work. So when I ask you to give to support that, I am offering you the amazing opportunity to invest in the mission of God.

Fourthly, and finally...

A disciple is someone with a soft heart

In our Gospel reading we heard this powerful story of a time when Jesus healed a man in the Synagogue, and the religious leaders who were there, instead of celebrating what God had done, sat stoney faced because it was the Sabbath day and in their view this healing constituted work. And the passage says, “Jesus was grieved at their hardness of heart.”

We all know about compassion fatigue. There are so many demands to help with our actions and our money that sometimes it's easier to close down in the face of all those needs. But Jesus was grieved at their hardness of heart.

Next week you will hear about some of the needs we are setting before you. We are going to be asking you to give towards a total of \$425,000 new money – over and above your existing giving – to address those needs. That's a big ask. But I believe we can get there. God is at work in this place. We see signs all over, In the dozen or so people baptized in the last few weeks. In the 4000 or so who visited us for Doors Open last weekend. God is at work, and we will follow where he is leading. Some of you sense this too. And although this is a big ask, some of you have already made pledges towards it, even before we have properly launched the campaign.

So, my prayer is that we might have soft hearts. That we might listen when God speaks, obey when God calls, invest our treasure in the mission of God, and so see the grace of God offered to more and more people in this place.