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**Matthew 16: 21-26 Discipleship**

**2nd passage: Hebrews 2:1-10**

**For Qs of Life, 18th February 2018, Question: How can we go deeper with God?**

TEXT

START IN PULPIT BY GETTING TOOLS OUT AND PRETENDING TO HAMMER SOMETHING IN TO PULPIT.

Do you think God might be calling us to a bit of this? And this GET OTHER TOOLS OUT.

It’s an exciting moment for us as a church. Soon we’re going to be preparing our next Mission Action Plan, and looking at how we can play our parts in God’s mission to our village over the next five years. If we’re going to be ready for that, we need to go deeper with God. So the question we’re looking at today is just that, ‘How can we go deeper with God?’

The answer to that question involves a lot of things. At the heart of it discipleship: learning more about being disciples of Jesus Christ. We go deeper with God by following the Lord Jesus more closely. What are disciples? Followers, or students, apprentices. Not just spiritual people, not just consumers of religion, but followers of Jesus. What does that mean for us today? It’s such a big question, it could be the overarching framework for our teaching for the year.

Here are two visual aids for being a disciple: SHOW BIBLE AND TOOLKIT.

Disciples are students, we learn from the Bible; disciples are also workers, we learn by doing and serving, we use the tools God has given us to make something beautiful for God, as Mother Teresa put it.

The toolkit means something else: as we disciples use the tools God has given us to make something beautiful for God, so God shapes us to become more Christ-like, more what he wants us to be. The Bible says that ‘we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’ (Ephesians 2:10), and as we work to go deeper with him, he is shaping us and going deeper with us.

Our gospel reading today takes us to the starting point of Christian discipleship, to what Jesus himself said about being a disciple. There are many other things Jesus also taught about following him, and we’ll come back to those on other Sundays. If these words of Jesus today seem a bit tough, come back next week when we’ll be looking at the part of the Sermon on the Mount where he said, ‘Consider the lilies of the field, they sow not, neither do they reap, yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these.’ Jesus taught many different aspects of discipleship. Today, What can we learn from his words here in Matthew 16?

The context to our passage: Peter has just worked out who Jesus is, v 16: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,’ and we come to the big follow up questions:

1. Then in verse 21 Jesus answers the question: Why have you come? V 21 – he’s come to save us and bring us to God by dying to take away the sins that make a barrier between us from God, and to rise from the dead so he can lead his followers through death to eternal life.

2. What do you require? This question is what Jesus answers in vv 24-26. This is where Christian discipleship starts, with these words of Jesus Christ about what he requires from those who follow him.

Some say that following Jesus is all or nothing. The famous 19th century missionary CT Studd wrote: ‘If Xst is not lord of all, he is not lord at all.’ Or we might think of the boy who couldn’t find anything in his pockets that seemed worthy to put into collection plate, so put the plate on the floor and stood in it, to present his body as an offering.

Others say ‘That’s a bit much, isn’t that a bit extreme for Anglicans, isn’t just a little bit of religion enough for us. We may not be in church in the body, but we’re there in spirit.’ It’s a very Anglican attitude, but it doesn’t square easily with the commandments that the Lord Jesus said were the greatest: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And “Love your neighbour as yourself.” What of our passage today, what does it tell us about being a disciple of Christ now and in England, in 2018.

First: Christian discipleship means we have a leader worth following:

Think how personal Christ’s words are here: “Those who want to be my followers” what must they do: “take up their cross and follow me” Who are these followers “Those who lose their life for my sake.” Do you hear the me’s and the my’s? Jesus is teaching that his religion is about:

not a formula but a friendship,

not ritual but relationship,

not an ism or an ology, but a person.

“Come after me” – it’s personal, “for me.” Being fully dedicated to Christ doesn’t mean legalism, not having a huge list of do’s and don’ts. The Jewish rabbis worked out a set of 613 do’s and don’ts which they reckoned they could deduce from the Old Testament law. Jesus said, that’s missing the point: first and foremost, his religion is about knowing, loving, following a person, Jesus Christ, about going where he was prepared to go.

It’s not about ticking off lists; it’s actually more like Follow my Leader. Sometimes follow my leader is a very easy game to play; sometimes it can be very difficult; it all depends on the leader. If we think of our great leader, we can see times when he was exhausted, times when he celebrated, times when he had nowhere to sleep, times when he was feted and feasted, when he was a refugee, when he was welcomed, when he lived under death threats, when he was super-popular, and when he was abused and persecuted. When he says follow me, it means he doesn’t ask us to do what he hasn’t done.

It's the centenary of the end of WWI this year. Back then, some of the generals who were most hated by their men in the First World War were the ones who never went near the trenches. Jesus was in the trenches before any of his followers, and he had it worse – follow me means that we don’t have to go where he hasn’t gone before us, he doesn’t ask us to lead where he wouldn’t go, just to follow. Remember our first reading, the last verse of it, Hebrews 2:10: ‘In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.’ Whatever he may ask us to do, he’s been there first, and been through worse.

Secondly, Christian discipleship means we have a cause worth making sacrifices for

See v 25. When he came into world he made our cause his cause. He now wants us to make his cause our cause – his cause is passing on the gospel, by word and deed. It’s not just what we say, but it’s not just what we do either, it’s both.

There’s a story about two old friends back in the time of Shakespeare. They were friends in childhood, then one became a landowner and the other became a sailor and went round the world with Sir Francis Drake. They met again in old age, one says I own this and this POINTING at all the land he’d bought with the money he made; the other said, I have nothing like that but I’ve served under the greatest sailor who ever sailed the seas (Sir Francis Drake). That’s like being a Christian: we serve under the greatest captain who ever walked the earth.

In a society that is moving further and further from its Christian roots, being a disciple of Jesus may sometimes be like a spiritual version of being in a resistance movement, you could think of the French Resistance in World War II, secretly fighting the Nazis. Christians today are fighting a multitude of moral and spiritual evils, from attacks on Christianity in the media, to massive greed and injustice in our economic system, from abortion to crime and corruption, from situations where Christians can be in trouble just for wearing a cross to work to those in which evils like drugs and the sex trade are completely destroying lives all round us.

In a world such as ours, Jesus’ call in verse 24, to deny ourselves, has a great resonance. Athletes have to deny themselves if they want to compete; look at those Winter Olympians on the telly, they didn’t go down to McDonald’s and say, ‘I’ll have a Big Mac with my Big Mac.’ They were disciplined. We Christians need to deny ourselves if we are to be soldiers in the Lord’s army. There’s a Christian saying, ‘Give up your small ambitions.’

We live in an age when people are very fussed about their rights, everyone’s busy claiming all their rights. These rights may be all good things, and deserved before other people, but before God our rights are not absolute; we have a choice, we can stick to all our rights, our right to self-fulfilment, our right to live our lives how we like, and so on, or we can give them up. The famous missionary Jim Elliott wrote: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” That may mean heroic gestures, or faithfulness in little things. There’s a famous quote in the book Catcher in the Rye: “It’s the mark of an immature man that he wants to die gloriously for a noble cause; it’s the mark of a mature man that he wants to live humbly for one.”  Denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus may mean living very humbly for the noblest of all noble causes.

Thirdly, Christian discipleship means we will be with our leader in the end

READ 27: ‘when he comes.’ If we believe this, it gives a whole new horizon to our lives. Christians wait for the son of God to return from heaven. There’s an old story about a man who was on a train journey from London to Edinburgh, and he was thinking about where his life was going, and he heard the sound of the rails under the train de-dum-de-dum and it seemed to him that the noise of the rails was like a voice saying ‘Saved Soul, Wasted Life.’ That man went on to become a Baptist minister and have a hugely influential life.

I remember one vicar saying: That story haunts me. It’s haunted many a Christian. Our souls may be saved, how useful are our lives? Lent is a good time to mull that question. The waste of a life may be caused by a number of things: for example, secret discipleship – not wanting anyone to know we follow Jesus, being ashamed of him and his words;

or it may be hanging on to things we know are sinful, refusing to give them up;

or it might be secret ambition – knowing we should be living for God but actually wanting to keep him in a box for Sundays only and follow our own dreams far from him the rest of the week;

it could, for some, be a relationship that drags us down, or one we know isn’t right with God; it could be lack of prayer or bible study; or lack of concern for our friends and their needs, including their spiritual needs; it could be a number of things.

So these are some of the things Jesus himself said about being his disciples: things like Not being ashamed of him or his words, denying ourselves, fighting for his cause, which may be costly.

That leaves us a question, as we start to look at what discipleship means for us here today:

What’s your ambition? What’s my ambition? The nicest life we can manage? The most success? The most money? The most popularity? Or two words: for the Lord Jesus to say two words to us: “Well done -- Well done, Good and faithful servant.” Let’s pray: