

Sermon 4 July 2021 'We are called to be disciples.'

Mark 6:6-13

Jesus is sending out his disciples in pairs to minister to the people. He tells them not to take anything – no food, no spare clothes, no money. They are to depend on the hospitality of the people. Hospitality was a sacred duty in the Middle East. When a stranger entered a village, it was not his duty to search for hospitality, it was the duty of the villagers to provide hospitality. And in this case, if that hospitality was not forthcoming, Jesus tells them they are better to move on.

Jesus also tells them not to take a travelling bag. A travelling bag was made from the skin of a goat. Often the animal was skinned whole and the skin retained the shape of the animal, legs, tail, head and all. It has a strap at each side and was slung over the shoulder. The bag carried enough food for a couple of days. So Jesus is telling them that they must put their trust in God – he will provide.

And what was their mission? Their mission was to spread the message of repentance, in other words, to change. That's what 'repentance' means in a literal sense. If you think about it, that does make sense. When we repent we want to do better, in other words, to change our ways. So they were to challenge the people to change their ways and to lead lives in harmony and accordance with the teachings of Jesus, the will of God.

Therein lies the challenge for us all. We all have a mission, we are all called to carry out Christ's command and, as I said last week, to do our bit to spread the love. Do we need to change? For some of us, that is probably required. Looking around this congregation, I don't believe that is a major issue, but if we are totally honest with ourselves, most of us could probably do a little better, just a wee bit better! However, for some that is more than likely to be a significant issue.

There is the story of a derelict man standing on a street corner in the Wall Street district of New York, begging for money. Reaching out his hand, he pleaded with a passing corporate executive, 'Change? Change?' The corporate executive responded with a pained expression on his face, 'I'm trying! I'm trying!' I suppose many of us are trying.

The entire life of a Christian should be one of working towards the mark of becoming the kind of person that Christ calls each one of us to be. There are countless passages in the New Testament which outline Christ's expectation of us, but one of my favourites is included in our first reading from Colossians. '*A God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility. Meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so must also forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*' They really are wonderful words and they sum up so well what is required of us in terms of living up to the classification of Christian.

The crux of that passage lies in the words, '*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*' This is what it all boils down to. The harmony Paul is referring to is what I touched on last week when I said that one of the great things about love is that it is a two-way exercise – both the receiver and giver benefit, they both feel good. You want to feel good about life, about yourself, then go and give some love.

Some time ago, Dr Nikki Harre, a lecturer at the School of Psychology at Auckland University, wrote, *'The very happiest people are rich in activities that involve community, contributing to other people's wellbeing.'* If that's not straight out of Jesus's Handbook for Christian living, I don't know what is.

Scott Peck, well-known psychologist and author, tells the story of a woman patient who was suffering from depression. One day, when she was due for an appointment with him, she gave him a call and told him that her car had broken down. Dr Peck offered to pick her up on his way to work, but he explained that he had to make a hospital call before he got to the office. If she was willing to wait in the car, they could then have their appointment. She agreed.

When they got to the hospital, he had another suggestion. He gave her the names of two of his patients who were convalescing there, and told her that each of them would enjoy a visit from her. When they met up an hour later, the woman was on an emotional high. She told Dr Peck that making the visits and trying to cheer up those patients had lifted her spirits and that she was feeling wonderful.

Dr Peck responded by saying, 'Well, now we know how to get you out of your depression. Now we know the cure for your problem.' The woman answered, 'You don't expect me to do that every day, do you?'

Therein lies the problem. Deep down we all know how satisfying and meaningful it can be to lend a helping hand to those in need, but all too often something gets in the way of us being able to do this on a regular basis. It could be preoccupation with our own lives, the reluctance to make sacrifices, or just being a little disorganised. But meaningful it undoubtedly is. Pablo Casals, the great musician of last century, said, *I feel the capacity to care for others is the thing that gives life its deepest meaning.'*

I want to conclude by making the point that any sacrifice we might make in order to be of service to others does not have to be one of great magnitude. It can be something quite small, but can have the potential to make an impact.

There is the story of the well-intentioned young man who said to God, 'I want to do something great for you.' God said, 'That's fine. See that person sitting next to you. Well, he needs a lift home.' 'What?' the young man said quietly. 'And while you are about it,' said God, 'there's an elderly lady who needs her garden dug.' 'But what about the world?' asked the young man. God smiled, and replied, 'Think about it.'

If we all do our little bit, every single one of us, we will change the world.

Rev Warner Wilder