

What Church Is (2)

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Room to Grow...

Luke 9⁴⁶⁻⁵⁶ / Psalm 8

The Church, by definition, grows disciples. It does so because it follows Christ and in the act of following one grows. The Church is then, an act of apprenticeship to the One whom we call LORD – to Jesus Christ. It follows then that one of the greatest concerns we must have for churches today is that of how we grow disciples and, indeed, that we grow them. Jesus was concerned to grow disciples – to teach His followers how to be disciples. Indeed the theme from last year's Assembly was quite simply this... that we might become 'disciple making disciples.'

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Mark 1)

'I will make – you fishers of men...' The Church is constituted by this activity. No other organisation on earth recruits and trains men and women to capture other men and women for the Truth; for God. No other organisation lives for this goal and activity. We live to disciple both new and old recruits. All of life is discipleship. We can never stop learning how to follow God.

It seems, however, that right from the beginning the disciples struggle to grasp both to importance and the principles involved in making disciples. They made mistakes; they didn't understand what was required to become a disciple-making body. I think we too struggle in this area and I want this morning simply to highlight three areas raised by our scripture this morning which demonstrate this.

Number 1 – discipleship is founded upon our welcome...

⁴⁶An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

Any educative process is difficult or, at the very least, it is work. Learning requires application which requires concentration which requires work. Moreover, learning requires an emotional

investment. We learn far better when we are motivated to learn, when we want to learn but to do this we need to feel positive both about our ability to learn and about **what** we are learning – about the subject matter. Most of us would struggle to learn the contract laws from medieval Spain or the marriage traditions of ancient Greece. And if the learning environment is negative we will struggle to learn no matter the subject. So it is vital if we going to make disciples that a primary sense of welcome is established.

Disciple making will hang on this welcome – this sense of being valuable to the community and of counting for something – not because of privilege or power or position but simply because we are valued for who we are. So much of the motivation to learn and to follow will hang on how valued we feel and how much our contribution is desired. SO much so that this sense of valuing our fellow Christian should be a hallmark of the Church. And Jesus says as much doesn't He? He says, 'By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another...'

Number 2 - disciple-making requires that we learn to value any positive contribution.

Another Exorcist

⁴⁹John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." ⁵⁰But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

Perhaps one of the most destructive behaviours in Church over the last 2000 years has been our tendency to become partisan in our loyalties and communities. By this I am not necessarily referring to the creation of different churches or denominations. Rather I refer to the destructive and critical note that accompanies so much of our church life both as denominations and as individual churches. I suspect that we Christians have, somewhat justly, obtained a reputation for being the best accusers in the game– for being experts at what's wrong with others rather than champions of what right with them; for being the puritans of history. Now granted, we are often put in a position where we can see the wrong clearly and we wonder to ourselves how on earth they can imagine that this behaviour or that law will improve anything in this society we live. And granted also that we need to retain a standard and a goal which is different from the world we live in but this leaves begging the question of how we relate to those who are if not on the same journey as us, are, at the very least, heading in a similar direction.

In this passage we find another using the very Name of Jesus Christ to effectively cast out demons and the disciples are still not happy about this. Why? Not, certainly because he is not being effective. Not because he is doing or saying anything negative about them or about Jesus. Not even because he is competing in any way with Jesus or with them. No. They are not happy simply because he is not aligned with them – he has not joined their group.

I come across a parallel attitude in the church quite frequently and particularly associated with age and interest differences. Interested as we are to see people come to faith and worship the God of the Bible we just can stand it when they... worship to terrible music; to loud, soft, quick, slow, old, new or middle aged music! We love to see people growing in their faith but we just can't stand it when they get over-the-top or they want to talk about it or they question our beliefs or they begin to believe slightly different things from what we believe. We long to see the Church filled with new believers but then we can't stand when they come and bring with them a whole batch of different problems from things like noisy children to simply the problem of doing church in a bigger environment.

The fact of the matter is simply this friends – if we are to make disciples we will have to contend with difference– with people who are learning and growing; who are not fully formed yet; who are rough diamonds and who are, for want of a better expression; not one of us! Are we prepared to do this? Are we prepared to accept those who, while we may not recognise quite how they are for us, **are certainly not against us!**

Number 3 - disciple makers learn to work with rejection...

A Samaritan Village Refuses to Receive Jesus

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"[£] ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then[£] they went on to another village.

This may appear to have little to do with discipleship on the face of it but it demonstrates an attitude which Jesus had to deal with in His own disciples and which is essentially anti-discipleship. This is the notion that in teaching we will or should never face rejection.

The Christian Church has become highly reactive, even indignant, in the face of rejection. We act at times as if we believe that most of the rest of society should think how we think and should act in the ways we think are right. We imagine that our understanding of what is right and wrong should necessarily be society's understanding and perhaps (though it would be a stretch to really prove this) perhaps when in earlier days we were ruled by a Christian King or a self-confessed Christian parliament, we might have had some justification for this belief. But not today. Today we can no longer assume that society will take our position on anything particularly seriously. Now we could weep and nash our teeth and become deeply depressed about this but there would really be no point since we face this context and no amount of sermonising over it merits or otherwise is going to change things. What will count is how we react to this state of play. And so much depends on how we view the people and the society

with whom we are trying to relate. Here I come to my key point because the issue here isn't so much one of defiance on their part as it is of ignorance.

So often when I read or hear Christians **reacting** to certain political positions or legal positions which seem from a Christian point of view to be wrong or even downright sinful the impression I get from those Christians is the we, the Church, are dealing with errant and delinquent children. It's as if 'they should know better and look how stupid they are being!' Even if it's not meant that way, this is how it comes across.

Let me say first of all that if this is how we come across to the general public it will do nothing to attract people to the Gospel because it not only sounds arrogant but it's just not attractive – it's not gracious. It doesn't encourage a second look because it's as if we begin every conversation with a challenge to the mana of the person we are trying to convince. It's as if we begin every conversation with the words "Look, you're stupid and you're doing some stupid things so here's some advice!" This, I believe, is how we so often come across to secular people in our society. And this is precisely the problem from a discipleship point of view.

If a teacher began every lesson with the statement "You're all pretty stupid so listen to me and you might get a few clues!" how do you think the pupils would react? Now granted Jesus did actually call His disciples 'slow' once or twice but if you look at His general approach to them and especially to the people He ministered to you will find nothing but grace and kindness. His was an attractive **mode** of address always. His was a merciful approach which preserved the mana and dignity of those He taught.

This, friends, is absolutely crucial in a disciple making community! That we should cultivate this fundamental sense of **respect** for those we teach and, indeed, for everyone so that people don't come away from this place thinking 'I am an ignorant worm' but they leave here thinking 'These people respect me; they like me here; they want me to stay and they **believe in me.**'

This is what enables people to learn. This is what keeps them motivated to learn. This is what establishes a affirm basis for discipleship.