

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **SHARING IN CHRIST**

**18<sup>th</sup> June 2017**

Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 10:24-39

I may have told you before about a young man I once met when we were both volunteering on Iona. His name was Paul. Paul was not a Christian, but very much wished that he could find the faith which so many people he was working with shared. His problem was that as a fit and active young man, of about the same age that Jesus was when he was ministering in Judea, he would look at the Biblical record of Jesus' life and teaching, and then say, "If he can do it, why can't I?" If Jesus can have this wisdom, if Jesus can have this knowledge of God, if Jesus can do these wonderful things in God's name, why can't I?

In some ways it sounds a bit arrogant, put that way. After all, Jesus was Jesus, he was God the Son, part of the Trinity. But at the same time, it is not so arrogant as all that. When God the Son became Jesus of Nazareth he became as fully human as you and me, with no greater divine power than we also can know. I still often think of Paul, although I lost touch with him long ago, and I think that he had understood the incarnation better than some faithful Christians, who tend to think that it was different for Jesus, easier for Jesus, because he was God.

Jesus himself did not think that it was impossible that his disciples and followers should be like him. His warning was not to expect to be better than him, to be more than him. "It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master." However, what he is thinking of, is not so much that as Jesus' disciples we should expect to be as wonderful as he was – which is what my friend Paul was edging towards thinking – but that we should not expect to be received and treated better than he was.

These are the words which I think Peter must have thought about deeply before he wrote his letter, which we have been looking at recently. You will remember that in 1 Peter he tells his readers over and over again that as followers of Jesus they should expect to follow him into persecution, and should seek to show him as their role model by the way that they accepted unmerited suffering.

I think Peter must have thought deeply about these words, about being like the master, and I think too that he must have remembered what Jesus said about God seeing the fall of the almost valueless sparrow, and how even the hairs on our heads are numbered and valued. Peter was also concerned to reassure his beleaguered readers that God loves and cares for them.

The words of Jesus which we read today are spoken to his twelve disciples, and they are words of warning and reassurance. As we read them we can trace Jesus' own experience in them. He warns that if they follow him the world will tar them with the same brush. He talks about the need to give up fear. He has to tell them things in

private, or else his ministry will end before it is finished, but they are to proclaim them in public, without fear. This lack of fear is not because they will be kept physically safe – that promise is not given, just as we are never promised that in following Jesus the human pains of ill-health and old age and other kinds of suffering will not come upon us. They are not promised physical safety or immunity, but they are promised the love and care of God, who will hold the important thing, their souls, their real selves, in his hands and in his presence. This has been Jesus' experience and will continue to be, until in his crucifixion he says "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Jesus knows that what happens in this world is just a dim image of what is eternally true before God, whether it is the fall of the sparrow, or the intimate knowledge of God's love which counts even the hairs on the head, or whether it is the way that we acknowledge Jesus as our Master before others, and fulfil his words and his work in the world. And Jesus knows that his work and his words are divisive, and will continue to be divisive. Was he set against his human father? We don't know, but the boy Jesus who ran away from his family to be in the temple was certainly not the kind of boy that Joseph was expecting to raise. But he knew about other members of the family turning against him. There was one occasion when his mother and brothers came to him to try to take him home and stop him speaking his controversial message of whole-hearted devotion to God. His message which asked far more than the minutiae of the law, because it asked that all of life be lived in God's presence; his message which offered far more than ever before of God's love, because it offered the presence of God in which to live. Jesus knew what it was to have family turn against him, even if it was because they just didn't understand and were afraid for him.

And he knew that none of that mattered. The love of God must come first. The love which God asks of us, because of the love of God which he gives to us. Jesus knew it all, and he invited his disciples to know that same life: he invited them, and he invites us, to be united with him. Is a wonderful invitation, to be at one with Jesus, and with God the Father through the Spirit. It is a wonderful invitation to be united, bound together with Christ; but we mustn't think that we will be given greater honour than Jesus was himself. Being united with Christ can never mean that.

There is hope in Jesus' words, even though they are a challenge and a warning. There is hope because the love of God is in them. And in what we read from St. Paul's letter to the Romans we find that this idea of being in Christ, of the disciple being like the master, like Christ, United with Christ is taken to whole new levels of promise. Paul is talking about our baptism into Christ and what that means.

We celebrated a baptism here recently/last week. On that day, and on the day when you were baptised, what was going on was a linking to Jesus in his death. Despite and beyond the physical limitations of time and space, a link was forged in a chain which holds you to Christ crucified. And so the old self died that day, and we were taken into new life with Jesus. When, in verse 4 Paul says that because of our baptism we "might walk in newness of life" he means that we might live our whole lives, from that day forward in newness of life. He is not talking about after we die. He is not talking about anything temporary. The new life given us at baptism is Christ's life and though we may turn from it, and reject it, if we hold to our faith it is given to us for ever.

For, says Paul, "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." And he concludes "So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." In saying that we must consider ourselves, Paul is implying that this is a way of thinking that we are to adopt, a habit of mind that we must get into. It won't happen all by itself, but will take some deliberate work on our part, until it becomes instinctive for us to remember that we live in Christ's risen life, and so need not give way to the baser instincts that seek to pull us back.

It is not easy to change the way that you think about yourself. If you are or have been married, think how long it took for you to get used to that. If you changed your name, how long did it take for you to forget to give your maiden name and remember to give your married name? How long did it take for you to remember your new identity? And you probably were wearing a ring to help remind you! I have one friend who married in her mid -40s, and says that still several years later, she instinctively makes one mug of coffee. Fortunately, her husband finds this funny, not offensive!

In just the same way that it takes time to be used to being married, or widowed, of course, at the other end of things, so it takes time and effort to get used to thinking of yourself as alive to God and dead to sin. And yet, don't you want to? Just as much as you want to remember that you are married, which is a happy change in your identity, so surely you want to remember that you are united with Jesus, in everything, an even happier change in your identity, for marriage is just for this life but union with Christ is for all time. It may bring you misunderstanding and opposition, but it also means that you are living with one foot in heaven itself. It means that the you who might want to speak hurtful words, or live with selfish intent, the you who might be tempted to speak less than the truth is not the real you. Be yourself! If you are united to Christ in his death by baptism, you are also one with him in his new life. And that is the real you, the you, you were born to be.

St. Paul says we should consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God, and considering takes time and thought. But what a delightful way to spend your thoughts, in considering your new status as one united to Christ. You will never be greater than your master - how could you be? You may be misunderstood even by your nearest and dearest at times, but you will be the self who you were created to be, the self which lives in the love and care of God, now and forever. Amen.

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