

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

## CALLED TO BE DIFFERENT

28<sup>th</sup> Oct 2018

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Luke 6:1-16

Some people love to stand out from the crowd. They do it on purpose, choosing their clothes to be just that bit different, brighter when others are wearing sombre colours, or darker when the rest of the world is in the more colourful clothes of summer. They wear their hair differently – longer or shorter, or shaving their heads – and they like to show that their thoughts and attitudes are different, more radical in one way or another. Yes, there are some people who love to stand out. And there are others who would rather die, more or less, than draw attention to themselves. They shrink from doing anything in public, that might draw eyes to them, they wear conservative clothing that no one will notice, and they keep their ideas to themselves. And most of us are somewhere in the middle between these two extremes.

Jesus stood out from the crowd. He did it on purpose, because no one would pay attention to him if he didn't first get their attention. And the way, at the beginning of his ministry, which he did this most of all, was that he defied the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were not a static religious body, something that one trained to become and was then ordained into. They were not priests, or lawyers in the formal sense, although both priests and lawyers could be Pharisees. To be a Pharisee was to be someone who stood for the religious purity of Israel. In a culture of occupation, which the Jews had known for many long years, the Pharisees had worked out that one way not to become assimilated into the occupying culture, was to stand up for their religion – religiously! This meant that they were people who learned and focussed on the law – the law that Moses gave and the laws that had grown up around this to preserve the purity of that law and make sure no one could break it inadvertently.

There was no law of Moses which forbade plucking ears of grain and nibbling them raw on the Sabbath, such as Jesus and his friends were doing. And the fact that they were doing it, indicates that this was something which many, if not most people

would think nothing of. But the Pharisees, who saw themselves as guardians of the nation's separateness, saw this as the thin edge of the wedge. If you did this small thing, then maybe you would begin to think it wouldn't hurt to take a scythe and cut just a little grain down, and then before you knew where you were, you would be harvesting – working - on the Sabbath. Or so they thought.

People were used to the Pharisees and respected them, because deep down people knew that they had a point. If they wanted to remain a distinct nation, and God's people, then their faith was the way to do it, and their faith gave them a code to live by.

And Jesus set himself against that. He was all for people knowing that they were God's people, but he was not about showing national introversion, by keeping a checklist of rules against which a person's and a nation's holiness could be measured. By living solely by the law, the nation of Israel was thinking about themselves, about their holiness, and not about their mission, to be God's people for the good of the world. The keeping of the Sabbath was one of the most obviously distinctive rules which the Jews had. Their occupiers had certain festival days associated with various deities, but they didn't have a weekly day of rest and worship. The Sabbath was holy ("Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" said the ten commandments). Jesus would not dispute that, he just wanted people to know that a holy day was a good day to do good things, and that the other days were holy as well. So he challenged the Pharisaical horror at the so-called harvesting, and he healed on the Sabbath, because God wants us to be healed and whole and happy on all days.

He did these things, and his crowd of followers saw him and heard him, and were intrigued by this new approach. He was different.

He was different, and his difference was attractive. After all, even if you thought that the Pharisees had a point about the need to keep the law, it wasn't a very joyful way of going through life. Jesus attracted people to him. By this stage in Luke's gospel we have seen him attract Simon and his brother and James and John, their friends and Matthew, the tax collector, as well as crowds which sought him out where he went. They came, they listened, they watched and some of them followed him around.

And it was from those who followed him around that he picked his disciples. He didn't do it immediately, but when the time was right. And, as they knew, because they watched him, he did it after spending a whole night in prayer.

Jesus prayed before he chose his twelve disciples. He didn't just murmur a short prayer, but spent the night placing himself in God's presence, then made his

decisions. The disciples, who had seen him show again that he had come to change the hide-bound, rule-bound way of doing God, also saw that he prayed and how he prayed. We are not often told what Jesus prayed, and on this occasion we are not given an eye-witness account of that night of prayer. Which is how it should be, because prayer is a very personal thing, it is opening up your heart to God, and giving up your own will to find God's will for you or for the circumstances about which you pray.

I wonder how Jesus prayed that night? I wonder if he went through the names of those who were regularly following him, and lifted each one up to God with the question, "This one, Father?" Much as Samuel considered Jesse's sons and asked God to show which was the one called to be the future king. I wonder too if that night Jesus had some surprises as he gradually came to the realisation that some of those who were not called might be those whom society would expect to be the first in line. We can't know that. Just like all good minutes, the names of those not appointed are not recorded!

But those called might have been astonished. None of them were the religious or intellectual elite, and many were from the margins of society. Fishermen were not held in high esteem, and nor, for other reasons, were tax-collectors. A Zealot was part of a fringe group calling for a violent end to the occupation. They were not all who might be expected, but they were called to be different. And they would realise that. You couldn't be a follower of Jesus and not realise that if he was different, you would have to be as well. You might not have to wear odd things or do strange things to your hairstyle, but your attitude to life would be different and if you were going to be a disciple, then you were going to learn to live that and to show it.

Jesus called a group of twelve. Later we will see that he had an inner circle of three who got special learning by witnessing what others did not. He called them to be a group, not a bunch of individuals who happened to be together. And that is the way he calls us as well. We learn by looking to Jesus, by reading the gospels, by prayer, but also by sharing our lives and our questions, our successes and failures and our prayers with others.

This is why I want us to think of forming small discipleship groups which can pray together and learn together and be there to help each other be better disciples. I will talk more about this next week, but on November 6th (which is a Tuesday) I would like to gather all who would like to try this way of discipleship together in the St. Bride's hall, so that we can talk about it and organise ourselves into small groups of three or four, maybe five, which will meet together regularly – they would

decide how often – weekly, fortnightly or monthly – and help each other in following Jesus.

We do need help, after all. Jesus didn't call the most obvious people, but the people from the edge, and this is still what he does. He doesn't call the already equipped and knowledgeable, but those who have a lot to learn. This is still who Jesus calls, and this is most of us. And if it is not you before you are called, if you are someone who holds a respected place in society, and are looked up to as having wisdom and having your life

together, then I'm afraid that in this day and age once it is known that you are a Christian, that you go to church, that you try to follow Christ and make his priorities your own, there will be those who will respect you less and feel free to look down on you more.

It doesn't matter, of course. Once Jesus had got under your skin, once you have realised that following him means more than keeping rules, that it means a life of freedom and radical love of God and of others, then you won't really care though you lose prestige in the eyes of the world. (And people will find that baffling as well.)

Our calling is to follow Jesus and so it is also to pray and then to act. Together. Our calling is to follow Jesus, and so it is, whether we like it or not, to be just that bit different.

One of the illustrations given to me in the teaching for Path of Renewal which I have been benefitting from, is that of the slow cooker. I have never owned such a thing, but I understand that the way it works is that you place into it the various ingredients for your finished dish, the vegetables, the meat if you eat meat, the seasonings, and then you turn it on and set it for eight hours or ten, or however long it is till tea time, so long as tea time is still far off. The cooker provides a gentle heat which slowly but surely changes your raw ingredients into a savoury dish, letting the flavours of the various things flow together and change each other and the whole. Thing is, if you don't turn on the heat, there is no cooking done and you end up with the same raw ingredients as you started with, while if you set the heat too high, it will just burn.

As we consider Jesus ways of teaching his disciples, I want to slowly turn up the heat for us, just a little, so that what we do on Sunday morning is not something which we leave behind as we leave the church building. These discipleship groups I mentioned is one way of doing this. Another is that I have prepared what we in Messy Church call "take home sheets for grown ups." On these you will find a summary of where we have been in October's sermons and a few suggestions of

things to think about or pray about or do. You don't have to have one, but I do hope that at least some of you will find these useful.