

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Faith's Rollercoaster

**Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 11th September 2011**

Daniel 7:13-18
Matthew 10:16-23
Colossians 3:1-4

If you are to be one of Jesus' disciples, then you need to be heavenly minded and earthly-aware. And although you will not know just what to expect, one thing that you really should not expect is an easy ride.

For Jesus' first followers, getting them ready to be apostles - those who were sent, must have been exciting. They had been with him, following for a while. They had seen what he had done and heard what he had said, and although there had been murmurs of opposition and ripples of disagreement with Jesus' message at times, Jesus had been more than capable of dealing with them, and so far they had not been too fierce and scary. The storm of opposition which would climax in Calvary was as yet no more than hinted at, and the disciples could well have missed these hints. They have seen the signs, and now they have been told to go and do likewise. They have heard the message of the coming of the Kingdom of God, and now they have been told to go and proclaim it themselves.

Up until now it has been as though they were children standing at the bottom of a roller-coaster, watching others enjoy the ride and waiting, itching for their own turn: it would be fantastic, and fun. But Jesus knows that when their turn comes - and they are pretty much at the front of the queue now - when they are winched up to the top of the ride and see the vertical plunge downwards opening up before them, that they will feel quite different. They might well find it exhilarating after the event, but at the time, and especially just before they plunge in, they will sometimes be pretty frightened. They need reassurance to hold on to, and they need reminded of who and how to be.

They will feel as though they are as sheep amid wolves. If you go to the Wildlife park at Kingussie you can see wolves. Usually they are simply walking around sinuously, only looking sinister if you know what they are capable of. But if you have ever seen them fed, and see what they can do to a chunk of meat, and see their teeth, then you can imagine the sort of damage that they could do to a flock of sheep, sheep whose only defence is in running away, and whose legs can't out-run the wolves, anyway. Wolves among sheep would be far worse than rogue dogs loose in the fields. They would cause a major panic among the flock.

Jesus expects his followers to know opposition, and to feel as helpless as those poor panicked sheep at times. Some of what he speaks of - his followers being taken to speak before governors and kings - will not happen for other than him until after he has come back to heaven, yet for the disciples in their life-times it certainly does happen. First century Christians were seen as a major threat to the established order. People were frightened of their message, because it meant questioning assumptions and changing the way they lived.

Properly articulated, our message is still frightening for the same reasons, to a society which likes to think that it has tamed the man from Nazareth. If we are true disciples, with a message to get across as well as actions to live out to reinforce and illustrate that message, we cannot expect a smooth and easy ride. Opposition happened from the first. Why should we be surprised if it seems to be happening again? We hear of people denied the right to wear a cross, people being taken to court

because they wish to give their foster children a Christian home life. It happens in this country, and it's not going to stop, unless we become silent.

After all, it happened first of all with Jesus.

Jesus had to be as wise as a serpent - seeing what was going on, understanding his society and his situation, hearing what the unspoken message of his contemporaries was and reading the signs aright. And yet he had to be as innocent as a dove - keeping on living by his message, keeping on trusting others, keeping on forgiving, keeping on hoping. He needed to be innocent in the sense of gentle and of doing no wrong. It is not easy to be both wise and innocent. But being wise as serpents without innocence leads to manipulative shrewdness, leads to thinking that the ends justifies the means. And being innocent without wisdom leads to naivete, to not really dealing with the world as everyone knows that it is, to not reaching out to where people are really at, because we have retreated within a little world of our own. And so our discipleship calls for wisdom and innocence

One of the things which scares most disciples most is the idea that if we speak the good news, give words to our faith and share it with others, then they will ask hard questions and we won't know what to say. For some of us this fear can be paralysing, and let's face it, it can happen. None of us know all the answers. We have faith in God, we experience his love, but we don't have his omniscience. Faith is about understanding what we can, but taking the rest on trust, because even without concrete evidence, it makes sense. Faith is about trusting enough to change the way we live and discovering through experience that what Jesus said and asked of us really does bring us closer to God, really does give our lives meaning, really does bring us joy.

Not knowing how to answer hard questions was a real possibility for the first disciples as well. They had been with Jesus for a while, they had seen and heard things which really shook up their world, but they knew, and Jesus knew better, that they didn't know it all. Actually, not knowing what to say, not having all the answers is not the end of the world. There is nothing as off-putting as a know-it-all. But when it does matter, and God himself knows what is important in any situation, then, says Jesus, it will be given to you what to say.

This promise is no excuse for not preparing for when you know you are to be asked to give testimony, in whatever context. God gives us our minds and expects us to use them. But sometimes it happens that testimony is asked of us suddenly, when we have had no time to think or prepare. Sometimes you can have no idea that *that* question would be asked of you, then God will step in.

I remember when I spent a year in the up-state New York town of Oneonta, and having this Scottish woman was a bit of a novelty, I was approached by the Assemblies of God church to come to one of their meetings, and "Give a word of testimony, sister." Well, in my upbringing, giving a word of testimony mean speaking for five to ten minutes, maximum. It was only after I arrived at the church that it became clear that they had set aside an hour for me - and they also expected me to sing. I vividly remember telling God "You know this is not my fault. You know that I would have prepared if I had known, please help." So God stepped in, and it turned out what he wanted to say to these people was about the love he expresses to us in his people wherever we are.

So Jesus tells his disciples to be wise and innocent, and to rely on God to give them the right words at the right and nerve-wracking times, and he promises that they have plenty to do, because they will not have gone through all the towns of Israel "Before the Son of Man comes" And what on earth does that mean? Or is it talking about things on earth at all? This word "Comes" is the problem. "Before the Son of Man comes." What it means depends on your perspective. Come means move towards where the speaker is, or where the speaker thinks of as base, or home. If we

are earth-bound and earth-orientated, then we expect it to mean the Son of Man's coming to earth - Jesus' return perhaps. But the phrase which Jesus is quoting, or referring to from the book of Daniel, is talking about the Son of Man returning to his heavenly Father. He is coming into heaven. So if we have our minds set on those things which are above, as Jesus did, then coming means his coming home, from here to God. For Jesus, where God was was home. It was the place he came from and where he would be coming back to. The values and standards, the truths that dominated and shaped his life, which gave him the vision and courage to go through with being the Messiah and the saviour of the world, were the things he had learned at his Father's side. These first disciples would not go through all the towns of Israel before Jesus returned from death and returned - came home to his Father.

What we call home is vital to us. It shapes who we are and what we think is important. If our hearts and minds are wholly caught up with the life that we see and share in the world around us, then being sent out as sheep among wolves is incredibly stupid. If we think most about how we will appear in the eyes of friends, family or neighbours, then our tongues will hang still in our heads when we could be talking about Jesus. But if we know that where God is is home to us, if that is the place and environment that we allow to shape and inform us, then what Jesus asks of us will be exciting, worth queuing up to do, worth the momentary fear that our earth-bound experience can still give us.

So we too have a lot to do, and it can look frightening. We sit at the top of the roller-coaster and look down, and maybe for a minute we wish we had never got on this ride at all. But the fun of a roller-coaster only begins when you take the first plunge, roar downwards nearly vertically, and feel your stomach lurch. The fun of discipleship only begins when we dare to do what we are told, act on our faith, take the first plunge, turn to our neighbour and, with that same lurching of the stomach, tell them about the love of God for them.

Amen