

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Discipleship Principles

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**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

Isaiah 6:1-10

Matthew 10:5-15

Sometimes when we are out in the car as a family, one of the children will suddenly say "Oh, I know where we are." And each time I get that little feeling of surprise. Because it will always be somewhere that we have been many times, but the recognition is always spoken in tones of sudden revelation and wonder. They hadn't known where we were before that moment, even though I had. Part of that is due to age difference, but a lot of it is due to the different perspectives that we have whether we are driving a car or if we are being a passenger. When we are in the driving seat we concentrate on every inch of the way, even if we think that we don't. When I say "I do this road to Laggan so often, I could do it in my sleep," or "The car knows its own way" I know that's not really true. The car needs a driver, and the driver does need to have her eyes open and her mind alert.

When you are a passenger, then you can sleep, then you can look out to the side or the back or read a book, or whatever, and so then you are not so familiar with where you are and where you're going.

Up until now, the disciples have been passengers with Jesus. They have been doing what is one important part of discipleship: following where he leads. They needed to have that time. But now it is time to move on to the next stage of discipleship: going where Jesus sends them. Now it is as if they are being asked to stop being passengers and to get behind the wheel. Slightly scary stuff, then, and they need to concentrate. So Jesus gives them some pointers, some principles to work from.

The first is that they are to start locally. If you have never tried to put that into practice you might think that this would be the easiest place to start anyway. Surely it is best to start where you know the people and they know you, where things are familiar? You'd think so, wouldn't you? But when Isaiah was sent out God knew that he might be listened to but not really understood, that it would be as though the ears of his listeners had been bunged full of cotton-wool, and their eyes closed, and that they had suddenly become unaccountably stupid. Isaiah was being sent out to his own people: to people who already knew what they believed, and what they thought that he believed. People who would not take kindly to being told that there was more to it than they thought, that God was greater than they thought, that God asked and gave more than they thought. They wouldn't in Isaiah's time, they wouldn't in Jesus' time, and they still don't.

The ancient Israelites had always shown a great willingness to listen to the religious beliefs of people from the nations around them, and to incorporate and adopt some of their exotic ways. It probably felt wonderfully cosmopolitan and maybe more "spiritual" to do so. In Jesus' day outside religions, especially those of Greece and Rome were seen as a threat, and the idea was to keep strictly to what had been passed on by the forefathers, lest the people forget what it meant to be Jewish.

In modern Scotland both of these forces are at work. There are many who think that Christianity is old hat. It has been around for ever and can't answer our modern questions and issues and it is just too limiting. They want to be more spiritual, and embrace a bit of this and a bit of that: some Hindu meditation and some Buddhist philosophy and a bit of pragmatic humanism with a vaguely pagan reverence for "mother Earth". To talk to such people about our Christian faith is uphill work, because they think that they know all about it, and know what we think and believe, and know the

limits of what we are saying - when in fact what they know is probably some second-hand travesty of the wonder of the God of creation loving us and sending his Son to die and lead us into freedom and life. It is not easy to start at home with such listeners - if they will even listen at all.

On the other hand there are those, often found in churches or nominally in them (members but never coming) who are aghast if the church acts in ways to show that in Christ we have a faith which is as spiritual as any in the world. They are appalled by meditation, or ecstasy or noise or commitment or utter stillness in worship. They want things done the "Church of Scotland way" , and by that mean what was the Church of Scotland way in their childhood church. It is not easy to start at home with such listeners - if they will even listen at all.

But Jesus said start at home. In his own context he knew that if he sent his followers out to the Gentiles and the despised Samaritans, he would at once lose the ear of his own people. He came to be the Jewish Messiah first of all. It was only by fulfilling all that was needed in that role that the salvation he won could be extended to all the world. But if his disciples went to foreigners before their own people, they would never get back any chance to win even some of the Jews.

Jesus said start at home, and he was right, even though it is always the hardest place. Churches who look to help the poor of the world in far-flung places, but pay no attention to the poor on their own doorsteps have no credibility with their neighbours. Which is not that we should not seek to offer help and good news abroad, far from it, but it means that we should always be aware of who and what are around us, and what help we can be offering here. We should be aware of the need of our neighbours, whether that need is caused by unemployment, by broken or strained relationships, by loneliness, by overwhelmed families, by illness, or by relative incapacity. We are told to start near to home. The good news about that, of course is that you don't have to pack or organise any travel plans. You are already in the right place.

The second principle which Jesus gives is a reminder that we have a message to get out. The disciples are also told to do various things, and the idea of curing the sick and casting our demons might well have appealed. But their actions, like Jesus' actions, were simply to illustrate their message: that the Kingdom of heaven has come near. Again Christians tend to fall into two camps on this - the all talk camp and the all-acts camp. For some of us it is easy to speak to others and tell them the good news that Jesus has come to save them and to redeem the world. For others of us it is a lot easier to act to bring relief to those who suffer in body, mind or spirit. But Jesus says we need to be able to do both. If we do not tell people the message, they aren't going to deduce it. What they will deduce is the Christians are good people and to be a Christian you have to be good - and the is the reverse of what our good news actually says. If we tell the message the Jesus saves sinners and makes us whole and gives fullness of life and redeems the world, but don't lift a finger to help those whose physical needs are obvious, then we will be branded all talk.

James said that faith without works is dead. But then, so are works without explaining the faith that lies behind them.

The third principle that Jesus gives for disciples is that what we do is emphatically not done from any sort of profit-motive. "The church is aye asking for money" How often have I heard that. Yes, we need money to maintain the form of ministry which we have at the moment, but that money should never be brought in or sought from those outside the church. The gospel should never come with a price. People are often surprised to find that there is no fee for a baptism in the church, or that the minister gets no money for conducting weddings or funerals. But what sort of witness would that be? That would be peddling the good news of Jesus, restricting it to only those with means.

In Jesus' day, disciples of various false Messiahs who popped up from time to time, tended rather to

strut around and expect people to pay to be allowed into the esoteric secrets which they had to disclose. But we receive from God freely. Jesus died for us freely. The good news of our salvation is beyond price anyway and to seek to make a profit from our ministry, our discipleship, is to cheapen it. I read this week of a disciple in Devon who has opened up a free café once a week in her home town. She was inspired by the parable of the loaves and fishes and looking around her saw that there were many who would love to go out for a meal or a snack, but in these difficult times simply couldn't. So her café is free - for all: whether you are rich or poor. And at the end of the day, when the staff gather for prayer, many people are asking if they can join with them.

I think that it is because of this third principle that I personally have a hard time with church sales etc. Surely when the church is reaching out into the community it should be giving, not asking. Surely if the people who put so much effort into the sale all remembered that the Biblical principle is to give God one tenth, then the church finances would not need to be asking from our neighbours and we could use our energy in serving them.

And the fourth principle to bear in mind as we go out where we are sent as disciples, is that people may think that they are accepting or rejecting us, but they are actually accepting or rejecting Jesus. We go as his representatives. We go in his power. We go with a serious purpose. The action the disciples were told to make, of shaking the dust off if they - and therefore Jesus and his message - were rejected was an action which good Jews would perform when leaving Gentile territory - they shook off the unholy dust. To do this in a Jewish place would demonstrate in a shocking way just how seriously the disciples saw rejection of their message. Nowadays it would have little impact: we have little dust anyway, what with tarmac and rain. But the instruction should remind us that our mission is a serious one. It is not something that we can take or leave.

Being a disciple does mean following Jesus, but it also means going where he sends, even when it is here, even when it is to people who know us.

As we gather around the Lord's table this morning we do so in repentance, asking forgiveness for all the times when we have been poor disciples. But let us also use our time of communion to recommit ourselves to being the disciples he has called us to be.

Amen.