

Heart of Discipleship



1. A Passion for Repentance (Romans 6:1-14)

The story is told of Julius Caesar when he set out to conquer Britain. When he landed on the beach with his well-armed legions he marched them to the edge of the Cliffs of Dover and ordered them to look down on the ships that had brought them there. Every one of them was on fire! Caesar had cut off the possibility of turning back.

No turning back. Caesar's way of making sure his troops got to the goal was to make sure that his troops captured someone else's ships.

I guess that's not a way we would particularly be motivated but even in modern warfare, part of good morale boosting is envision forces to move forward and not see retreat as an option. The only way to win battles is to move forward.

That's true generally in life. If we want people to go forward and not turn back in their lives is to give them the hope that there is something worth going forward for so that what's behind is not worth going back to.

I originally thought that I would start my new series, Heart of Discipleship next week because of the baptisms, but then I realised that baptism represents a start point - a beginning - for most Christians. It's a statement of intent which says "I am going to follow Jesus!" For the benefit of those visiting, over the last few months we have been looking at the foundational principles of the Christian faith. They all appeared right from the start and you'll find them in Acts 2:

➡ Worship - they expressed in their lives their devotion to the God who had showed His love to them. Worship is an expression of worth. We had a series called Heart of Worship where we examined worship in the Psalms

➡ Fellowship - they met together and expressed their love for one another. Why? Because they had experienced a God who had desired fellowship with them.

➡ Mission - they were people that believed they had something so amazing and so radical, that they couldn't wait to tell everybody about it.

➡ Discipleship - they were a people who committed themselves to learn and grow in their faith

➡ Service - they served one another and served Christ.

So therefore we studied the Heart of Worship, the Heart of Fellowship, the Heart of Mission and now we come to the next series - the Heart of Discipleship. As I've said, a baptism is a perfect day to start this subject.

Why? Because all those who trust Christ are his disciples. These four being baptised are bearing witness to the fact that they are His disciples.

Disciples is a term that we don't use much today and over the next few weeks we shall discover why - because as with the other things we looked at in the previous series, what we find as we look at God's word is radical and life changing; which is by and large quite out of line with what church stands for in Britain today, which is anything other than radical or life-changing. So if we avoid using the word disciple, then we can avoid using Jesus' description of what one is or we try to make the word disciple not apply to us.

When I was young, preachers used to make a difference between salvation and discipleship. You trusted Christ and became a Christian and then your next step was to become a disciple by becoming more committed in some way to Him. I still come across it today. People think that being a disciple is an optional extra - just for the keenies or the more advanced Christian..

But that just isn't what the Bible says. Accepting Christ is an acceptance of being part of God's family and Christ's followers - Christians - are always called disciples in the Bible. There is no such thing as being saved and then becoming a disciple. If you are a Christian you are a disciple.

So what is a disciple? A learner. A disciple of Christ is a Learner of Christ. I did a Portuguese course last year. I became a learner of the Portuguese language. If you learn a language you have to be committed to learning it as it can be hard work, particularly Portuguese. The people who were in the class learnt at different speeds but we were committed to learning it. We soon found that there were one or two people that liked the idea of learning Portuguese but were not committed to it and dropped out because they hadn't really counted the cost in terms of the effort they needed to commit to it.

I'm still not a fluent Portuguese speaker and won't be for a long time. But just because *eu falo portuges um pocou* doesn't disqualify me from trying to communicate to Portuguese people in Swaffham.

As a disciple of Jesus, I'm not fluent in Him either. For as long as we live on this earth, we will never know every facet and nuance of Christ - but as followers of Christ, we learn of Him and we move along at different paces. As a disciple you are a learner of Him and the fact that you don't know everything about Him when people challenge you can you can't explain things well doesn't disqualify you from calling yourself a Christian.

As we live our lives we learn more and more. It's the nature of life, we live and learn literally and being a disciple of Christ is the same. We make mistakes too - and learn by them.

In fact I guess that the biggest fools we will ever meet are people that think they know it all. We've all met them. The people that seem to know it all - yet when it comes down to it, their cat probably has a better grasp of life than they do!

And that's at its heart what baptism is - a statement of intent to be learners of Christ. It's not a statement of a standard you have achieved but the start, which is why people are usually baptised shortly after they start professing faith in Christ.. It's a statement that says "I'm going to follow Jesus". That's my choice and intent. Baptism is a mark and symbol of that. It's a public statement that I'm following Jesus. And what we do is dump these people underwater as a sign of that intent. Like Caesar, they don't plan to turn back.

But why follow Jesus and then be baptised?

 Because God has desired to enter into a relationship with us

If you were to ask me what is distinctive about the Christian faith then I'd say this. God desires to have a relationship with you and me. He wants that relationship and desires to be part of our lives. He wants us to be His children. He wants to pour out His love and favour on us. He wants us to spend eternity with Him. And He does it freely without expecting a return - in other words he does it all as a free gift.

He wants to do that? That goes against all the logic of all world religion and the principles of our society and it doesn't make sense to most people. All religion and just about everything we achieve on Earth is meritorious. We do something to please others and we get something in return.

The Christian faith is zero meritorious. As far as the Bible is concerned, you get nowhere with God by what you do. It is grace-based. Grace is simply unmerited favour. God just wants to show us His favour based on His love for us irrespective of who we are. Anything you do out of the resources of your own life is not going to wash an iota with God.

Many Christians find this idea difficult to cope with too as we shall see in our evening series on Galatians which we start tonight. Grace is a different value system and over the next few weeks as we see what Jesus says about His disciples, we'll find that being a Christian should not just be a different way of living, but a different way of thinking too.

God wants us and wants to enter into relationship with us. But we have to want to enter into relationship with Him. Now think about this carefully. I said earlier that there isn't anything that human beings can do to impress God. That's an understatement. God can't stand how we think or how we act because it falls so short of Him.

There's God holding out that hand of love and acceptance and we just push Him away. How would you feel if you place out a hand of friendship and get pushed away. Upset? Hurt? Angry? That's a picture that many people have of God. Distant, stern, angry. He's the God of love, so how do you think He got to be angry? Incidentally, the Bible has a word for attitudes and actions we have committed against God - it's called sin.

So how come God feels He can have a relationship with us? How does He deal with the fact that we've sinned - we've pushed Him off. We find that baptism is a mark of how God has done this and what that relationship means.

Because Jesus made that relationship possible

Jesus died to bear the consequences of our sin. God laid out His anger on Jesus and satisfied His righteous requirements when Jesus died on the cross. If we had read the previous five chapters of Romans we would have found great verses like Romans 5:7-8

7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And as a result of Jesus' death on the cross, we have an offer of reconciliation with God and a gift of eternal life. But for a gift to become your own, you need to accept it and we do so by faith - by trusting what God promises.

That's the picture that Baptism teaches us. It shows what happened to you when you trust Jesus. The passage we read this morning said

3 Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

What does that mean? First of all it doesn't mean that these people are becoming Christians by being baptised. They have trusted Christ already so they are Christians.

Perhaps to understand these words we need to understand the word "baptism". For the benefit of those who don't come here normally, the word baptism comes from the Greek word baptizo which means to immerse or submerge, in the sense of dunking something, like a cloth into dye or a biscuit into a cup of coffee.

So why don't translators just use the word immerse and not baptise. The short of it is that even though immersion was the early form of baptism (and to believers only), sprinkling or pouring came in as did the baptism of infants. Oh dear! How do you stop a tradition once it starts? You don't. You surround it in mystery by calling it a mysterious sounding word "baptise" and make a religious rite out of it. But there is nothing magical about this water. It's Anglian Water and we make coffee out of it.

If you're a student of scripture, lose the word baptism and just insert immerse instead and mysteries become truth straight away. So for example, this passage in Romans we find an interesting description of what happens to us when we trusted Christ.

3 Don't you know that all of us who were immersed into Christ Jesus were immersed into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through immersion into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

When we trust Christ - we are immersed into Him. When you immerse something, it gets wet, rather like the way you dunk a biscuit into coffee. The damp pervades what has been immersed.

We are identified completely with Him. We are identified with His death. He died, so when we accepted Him, we died too and were freed from the consequences of sin. I haven't got any time to go into the ins and outs of this here today. Perhaps we'll do a series on it!

But that's why we immerse people in water. It's an outward sign of what has happened to them. In Christ, have died with Christ so that God's righteous requirements are not just satisfied in Jesus, but they are satisfied in me. My sin is dealt with so no barriers exist to me and God knowing one another.

But there is more to this life-sized visual aid than just this.

 Because the Christian faith is a life-transforming relationship

4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life

Jesus rose from the dead. If we are immersed into Christ, and identify with Christ, then we have been raised too to live a new life. The act of baptism this morning is not just going to be about immersing people, but lifting them out too - but in the case of my two I might just leave them underwater! Jesus was raised to new life, so are we - we are raised to be different because disciples of Jesus have a new life.

What does living a new life mean. It means living God's way. We have a special word for it - repentance. Repentance means a change of mind and heart - a turn around. Moving forward and not going back - like Julius Caesar.

At the bottom line of Christian discipleship is repentance - determining to live God's way and not my way. That is also what baptism is about.

You see, we could say. If God gives us all this free, all I need to do is accept this then I can do as I please. God is gracious so He can show just how gracious He is by Him putting up with whatever I want to do with my life whether he likes it or not. Paul had not missed that one either. Look at verse 1.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means!

But if we have understood the picture of immersion this morning and have understood that we have identified with Christ then we say with Paul

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

As we have been raised to new life we say "I'm going to follow Jesus" and we show our intent to live as He lives - to follow Him. To be learners of Him. We don't come instantly perfect, never doing anything wrong by accepting Christ - but we commit ourselves to learn how to live in a way that pleases God.

So what about you this morning? You've hear my message and are going to see this oversize visual aid in a minute but you know you have no relationship with God. All I can say this morning is that there is a God out there that loves you and desires a relationship with you. Jesus died so that you could have that relationship. Are you ready to trust Him this morning.

For most of us here this morning, we have made a commitment to follow Jesus. Most of you have been baptised? But that was the start of following Jesus. Perhaps as we have been reminded about repentance this morning that we realise that that promise and determination we expressed at our baptism has been less than what it should have been. Perhaps there are things in our lives we know dishonour God. It may be unforgiveness or a critical spirit. it may be that by our speech or the way we act that people don't even recognise us as the people of God. The remember, we are learners. Let's learn from Him. Let's repent of those things in our lives that we know don't honour the One who gave Himself for us and follow Him.

Let's pray.

