

7 March 2010

The Purpose Driven Life – Part 4 – Created to become like Christ - Discipleship

Readings: Ephesians 4: 14-19 Matthew 4: 1-11

Last autumn, here in St Mary's, we followed a teaching series on Discipleship. I remember, in the first sermon in that series, asking the question 'What is a Disciple?' The life of a disciple revolves around Jesus. To become his disciple, you take on his yoke. You devote your entire life to being like him. It's not like one day all of a sudden – ZAP – you're just like Jesus. Discipleship is a process, and it takes an entire lifetime. It's going to take the rest of your life for God to build character in you, the character qualities of Jesus Christ.

In our following of 40 Days of Purpose through this Lent, we have seen that God's first purpose for us is for us to love Him as he has loved us. We were Planned for God's Pleasure, to get to know and love God. This is called **worship**. Last week we talked about how "You Were Formed for God's Family." God wants you to learn to love other people, to care for one another, as we do in our own families, and get along in His family. This we call **fellowship**. Today, we look at the third purpose God has for our lives. '**We were created to become like Christ.**' **Discipleship**.

Paul says in Romans 8 v 29, "*From the beginning God decided that those who came to Him should be like his Son*". Becoming like Christ is Christian discipleship. But this doesn't just happen. We need to be nurtured and 'grow up in our faith'. As it says in Ephesians 4 v 15, "*God wants us to grow up ... like Christ in everything.*" (Message)– '*speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*' – (NRSV)

God uses people in your life to help you grow, and that's why you've got to have a lot of contact with other people. Other Christians, and that's why you need fellowship. Our Baptism Training DVD makes this point. You're never going to be a lone ranger Christian, the solitary coal going cold on the hearth. This is another reason why being in a small group is so vital for the Christian – to nurture one another, to feed and be fed by one another.

God wants us to mature and develop. Unfortunately, a lot of people grow older but never grow up. To use the analogy from elsewhere in the Bible, some people stay on spiritual milk – or even regress to it, having tasted more solid food. Our third purpose in life is to grow up, to become like Christ. How does God purpose to do this?

Today we're going to look at three things that you may have not thought God uses, but He does. And this reminder may, for some of us, be painful. C. S Lewis said that pain is God's megaphone.

Romans 8:28. *“In most things, God works for the good.”* Oh, I read it wrong. *“In all things God works for the good for those who love Him, who have been called according to His purposes.”* God works in all things for good to make us like Jesus. And you might ask, “Oh, what does that include?” It includes “all”. Does that include bad things? Painful things? Does it even include mistakes we make from sinning? Yes, it does. In all things God works for the good of those who love Him. It doesn’t say all things are good because there’s a lot of bad in the world, but God uses all things to make me like Christ. It’s been said we can never make a mistake with God – because God will even use our mistakes for His purpose. God uses all the experiences of our lives, even our failures and mistakes.

It’s worth remembering that Jesus himself didn’t have it easy in his life.

He was tempted in the desert.

He was attacked by the religious leaders.

He was criticised for keeping bad company.

At times the demands of ministering to the crowds left him exhausted.

He was betrayed, his friends left him.

He was arrested and suffered terribly before he was executed.

If Jesus had testing and difficult times, it should come as no surprise that we too, as his disciples today, will also have to face our share of troubles of one sort or another. And if you’re going to grow to be like Jesus Christ, God’s going to take you through these same painful experiences. The problem is, these things don’t automatically help you grow. You have to have your heart ready, because if your heart isn’t ready you’re going to become bitter by these things rather than better by these things.

There are ‘**Three Unexpected Tools**’ that can help us to grow in our faith:

1. God uses trouble to teach us to trust him
2. God uses temptation to teach us to obey
3. God uses trespasses to teach us to forgive

1. God uses trouble (or trials) to teach us to trust him

Sometimes we meet people who seem to go through life Teflon-coated, and with a smile on their face. But for most of us – me included - life’s troubles are part of our experience of this world. Christians have learnt from Jesus that trials are there to stretch us and help us to grow. What matters is how we face them. They build up our character and make us what we are.

The bible word used for trouble is the word **'trial'**. Trials are the times when we turn to God when we're facing a crisis in our lives such as at home within the family, or it may be a redundancy, or an illness or a bereavement.

Paul wrote in Romans 5 v 3-4, "*...troubles produce patience. And patience produces character, and character produces hope.*"

When people are facing times of trouble they often ask "Why". "Why is this happening to me, I've done nothing wrong?" Of course, there is no easy answer. Look at Jesus. His life was never going to be easy if he was to do His Father's will. Life was not a 'comfortable' one for Jesus.

Comfortable living is not the Christian life in this world. Comfort will only be found in eternity. Many of us may be fortunate enough to live comfortably but that doesn't stop us having trials in this life. Trials build our character – and to remind you, when we die we take nothing with us. God is far more interested in what you are in your life, than in what you do. Why? Because you're not taking your career to heaven with you, but you are taking your character.

Jesus' greatest time of testing came on the night before he died when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew he was about to be arrested, to suffer and to die. At prayer, he was filled with all sorts of doubts and the feeling he wanted to run away from it all.

As it says in Mark 14 v 32-34, "*They came to the garden called Gethsemane and Jesus said to his disciples, 'sit here while I pray ...' Distress and anguish came over him, and he said, 'The sorrow in my heart is so great it almost crushes me.'*"

Whenever we're in trouble we usually turn to friends. Jesus' disciples, his friends, were there but ... they didn't help Jesus. They were too tired. They wanted to sleep off their Passover Meal. Jesus, left alone, didn't run away from his trials. Instead he turned to God. "*Father,*" he said, "*everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine.*" (Mark 14 v 36)

Even under pressure, when things could not look any worse, he trusted in God. 'Your will be done' was his response so that the purposes of Jesus' life could be fulfilled. If Jesus had run away then God's plan for our salvation would have been lost. But Jesus didn't run away, instead he accepted the cup of suffering that was to be his.

If we are to live a purpose driven life then we have to say with Jesus 'Your will be done', the familiar words from the Lord's Prayer. It is only when we take these words to heart that we can 'surrender all' to Him, the God who so loves us – 'Thy will be done!'

If you're going to become like Jesus Christ, you've got to learn to trust God completely, even when things look terrible, things are falling apart. "I don't understand it, I'm dying, I'm sinking, I can't cope". God uses trouble to teach us to trust Him. It's easy to trust God when everything is going well in your life. The real test of your faith is: how do you relate to God when things go wrong? It is in these times that God teaches you, and gives you the opportunity, to trust Him.

When I was considering ordination, I was asked to write my Spiritual Journey. The ups and downs of life. The joys and 'wow' moments – the deep disappointments - and to reflect where God was in those times. Keeping such a record is called Journalling. God told Moses to do this when they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Numbers 33:2: *"At the Lord's direction, Moses kept a written record of their progress"*.

A spiritual journal isn't the same as a diary. "Dear Diary, I went shopping today and I saw a really handsome man – or girl." The difference between a diary and a journal is that a diary is a recording of the events in your life. A journal is a recording of the lessons and insights learned in your life. That's the difference. Read Hebrews 11 – the Hall of Fame as it is called. And it is when we look back that we see the hand of God. We were reading Genesis at Morning Prayer this week – Joseph of the coloured coat, sold into slavery, the incident with Pottiphar's wife, imprisonment, then how he rose to become the effective ruler of Egypt. And what did he say about this time – 20 years, however long it was? As he looked back and reflected, he was able to say that it was God who caused him to be sent to Egypt, it was God who made him lord of all Egypt.

When we accept God's plan for our lives it is only then that we can 'grow up' as Christians. It is in that moment when we are prepared to surrender our wills to His. That is Christian maturity! Again, it's important to bear in mind that we need to take the long view in all of this, and remember to the reward before us. Paul writes *"Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all"*. (2 Corinthians 4 v 17). God uses trouble (or trials) to teach us to trust him.

2. God uses temptation to teach us to obey

Does that surprise you? God uses our **temptations** to teach us to **obey** Him. God never tempts us. Satan is the tempter. The Bible is very clear about that. But God is able, because of the greatness of His power and who He is, to use Satan's temptations for good in our lives because

temptation always provides a choice. Choices are needed to develop character in our lives. When I choose for God rather than choosing for Satan, Satan's plan is ruined and I start to grow in my life. In the Old Testament the word used for Satan is the word 'Deceiver'. Deception lies at the heart of temptation. It tells you that it's OK, nobody will notice, and it's done by others anyway.

Jesus faced temptations. He never sinned, but He faced temptations. Right after He was baptised at the very beginning of his public ministry, He went through an intense 40-day period of temptation out in the desert. Matthew 4:1. *"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil"*. Where we see Satan's tactics – first the doubt, then the tempt. 'Did God really say...?'

Remember that it is not a sin to be tempted. Jesus never sinned, yet He was tempted. Note this, though: Jesus' temptations remind us of the power of Scripture (and why memory Verses are a key part of 40 Days). Each time Jesus was tempted he turned to scripture to rebuff Satan. Matthew continues, *Jesus said, "Get out of here, Satan, the Scriptures say, Worship only the Lord God. Obey him only."*

To each of you, and to me, I say 'your temptation is just like everyone else's'. All of us are surrounded by temptations. Temptations can range from the trivial things like food, to much more serious challenges. But if we succumb, big or small, sin is sin. Wrong. It is not a sin to be tempted. It's what we do with the temptations that come our way that matters. And God is able to help us through these temptations.

Temptations do cause times of testing for us. They test whether we have more love for the temptation than for God. When you resist a temptation, it is a way of saying 'Yes' to God. Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, *"If you love me, you will obey my command to love one another."*

Two tips about temptation. One of the most practical ways of resisting temptation is to move away from it. If we put our energy into trying to resist it means we're thinking about it. It becomes a tug-of-war pulling us one way and then the other. Instead, drop the rope as it were. Walk away. Think about something different and put space between you and the temptation. Philippians 4: 8: *"Fix your thoughts on what is true and right."* When tempted, take a verse like this and let it turn your mind from what's wrong to what's right. You'll find that the temptation starts to drop away. You refocus on something else. You keep focused on good thoughts.

The second tip is, get a spiritual partner. I know none of us like to talk about our temptations, but one of the ways to defeat them is to be open about them, to bring them out into the light. The Bible tells us in Eccl. 4:9-10, *"You're better off to have a friend than to be all alone...If you fall, your*

friend can help you up". So many of us, as we go through life, we have a temptation that's been overwhelming. It might be new and it might be lifelong. But the truth is, it's something you've faced alone. This step is saying, "Go tell someone else about this". They're not going to drop their jaw too far, because almost certainly they've faced the same kind of temptation as you.

I had a conversation with an attractive lady at a wedding reception. She said how, in her open plan office, a new employee stopped at her desk for a chat, en route to the coffee machine. One day he gave her a card. "My phone number. Call me". She knew it was an invitation to meet away from the office. She admitted she was minded to go. Then thought again. When she got home, she told her husband. The 'sting' was drawn – the temptation was resisted. Have a spiritual partner – maybe a friend, maybe a spouse – and talk with them. This is one of the best ways of resisting temptation. Together, you are stronger and encourage a life that is focused on God.

3. God uses trespasses to teach us to forgive

While he was in the United States, in Georgia, John Wesley served as chaplain to General Oglethorpe. One day the General said proudly to Wesley, "I never forgive." "Then I hope, sir," replied Wesley, "that you never sin,"

Every time we say the **Lord's Prayer** we say, "*Forgive us our trespasses*" (say it with me...) "*as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

Forgiving those who have trespassed into our lives is a very difficult thing to do. It's one thing to handle trouble and it's another thing to handle temptation. But the most difficult tool of all that God uses in our lives to make us like Christ is this one. When we – or those close to us - have suffered insult or injury from others and been badly hurt, the most natural thing in the world is to want to retaliate – to get our own back. Or, even if we don't retaliate, we find ourselves saying 'I won't, I can't, forgive'. And that actually causes us more hurt as we store up inside the anger so it knots us, and can even cause us physical and/or mental illness.

I remember hearing of a lady who showed all the symptoms of arthritis. Bent back, fingers curled so she couldn't straighten them, and so on. She was in deep, unforgiving, conflict with someone. And one day, forgiveness broke in – the relationship was restored. And guess what – her back, her hands, straightened. All the 'arthritis' symptoms disappeared.

But Jesus teaches us to forgive those who trespass against us. On the cross Jesus Christ not only carried our sins, He also endured enormous abuse from the people. In Matthew 27:39-44 it says, "*The people passing by (looking at Jesus on the cross) shook their heads and hurled insults at Jesus...and the elders made fun of Him...Even the bandits who had been crucified with Him*

insulted him in the same way.” And what was His response, even as the nails were being driven in? *“Father forgive these people, because they don’t know what they are doing.”* (Luke 23 v 34)

The truth is in life you’re going to be hurt. This is not heaven. This is a fallen world. Everybody sins. You hurt other people. Other people hurt you. We hurt each other intentionally and unintentionally. You’re going to be hurt often in life. And if you’re going to become like Christ, you have to learn to forgive.

Two tips about forgiveness. First, remember that God has forgiven you, forgiven me. The Bible says *“Forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ”* (Eph. 4:32). God will never ask you to forgive anybody more than you’ve already been forgiven by Him. Second, remember God is in control. When you’re being hurt by somebody else, God will use it for good in your life.

I spoke just now about Joseph, the story in Genesis. When Joseph reveals who he is, his brothers are afraid he is going to kill them. And yet Joseph says this: *“You meant to hurt me, but God turned your evil into good to save the lives of many people, which is being done.”* (Genesis 50:20).

God’s third purpose for your life is to make you like Jesus Christ. And if that’s true, then He’s going to take you through everything Jesus went through. Why would He exempt you? That means He’s going to take you through a Gethsemane, an experience of trouble, where you learn to trust His love. He’s going to take you through a desert, an experience of temptation, where you learn to obey Him and do the right thing. And He’s going to take you to the cross, a time of trespass, where you learn to forgive. But there is a promise: *“We go through exactly what Christ goes through”*. Here’s the good news. *“But if we go through the hard times with Him, then we’re certainly going to go through the good times with Him.”* (Rom. 8:17)

By forgiving the other person, even if they haven’t had any remorse, we free ourselves from the past and grow as people. Again, it’s not about forgive and ‘forget’. Because we often carry the wounds with us we cannot forget. That’s why Jesus said we must forgive and forgive. It may well be that we can forgive one day, but then the next day we feel uptight again, and so we have to learn to forgive and forgive.

During his public ministry in Galilee Jesus has taught his disciples to forgive others, not just once, but 70 times 7. We think we’ve forgiven, but the hurt re-emerges. This reminds us that there must be no limit to your forgiveness.

Imagine finding buried in your garden a glass jar, and it's full of mud. It is impossible to put anything in, until the dirt is cleaned out. This is like us, and forgiveness. We must first clean out the dirt of unforgiveness in our lives, so that we are open to receive the forgiveness of God.

Whatever the wrongs we may have to suffer from others, we are to forgive them. The reasoning for this is straight forward. If we don't forgive, who is the one who remains hurt? We become bitter and locked into the past. Paul wrote "*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 2:5). This is what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Of course, the main reason Jesus taught us to forgive, as he said in the Lord's Prayer, is because He has already forgiven us! If we have received forgiveness from God, then we must learn to share that same forgiveness with others. Forgiveness is at the heart of Christian maturity. It is one of the signs that we have 'grown up' in our walk with Christ.

The third purpose of your life is to 'grow up' in our faith 'to become like Christ Jesus'.

It means trusting God in times of trouble.

It means turning away from temptation and focusing on Jesus in all we do.

It means learning to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us.

So what's your attitude like? Being like Christ doesn't mean we are perfect. None of us will be perfect this side of the grave. As Christ was obedient to God and very human in how He lived, so we are called to be obedient to God's purposes for our lives.

Let us pray ...

Dear God, I want to grow in character. I want to become who You made me to be. Thank you for the model of Jesus. I want to become more like Jesus in the way I think and the way I feel and the way I act. And if that means taking me through troubled times, then I say "I want Your will for my life". And if that means going through the wilderness of temptation, please give me the strength to make the right choices. And if that means I must endure the hurts of other people, then teach me to forgive as much as You have forgiven me.

As much as I know how, I want to ask You to come into my life and Heart. In Your name I pray.
Amen.

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