

Mark 8.27-38

Live by dying

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 13 February 2022

Rooted Disciples [1]

Intro to the series

Today we begin our Lent series. Yes, I realise it isn't Lent yet – and yes I realise we started our Advent series early too. Who doesn't like a bit of bonus penitential season...

There is no Lent course this year, but there is a Lent book *hold up The Radical Disciple*, and I hope that most of the home groups will be following along using the questions I will be providing.

John Stott was arguably one of the greatest Anglican leaders of the 20th century, and one of the greatest Evangelical leaders of all time. He taught about creation care before it was trendy. He argued Christians should *listen* to culture but not be *led* by it. And alongside his commitment to Biblical truth and holiness, he was full of God's love, gracious, kind, and sensitive – we all need to learn from one (or maybe even both) of those sides to John Stott.

These are the last two books he wrote before he died: *The Living Church* and *The Radical Disciple*. They are deceptively simple: because following Jesus faithfully isn't complicated – but it isn't easy either.

The sharp-eyed among you may have noticed that our series isn't called *The Radical Disciple*, it's called *Rooted Disciples*. That is because in his introduction Stott explains the word 'radical' comes from the Latin *radix* which means 'root'. So he doesn't use it to describe an extremist, but someone whose convictions go all the way down to the roots. He also refers to the parable of the sower, and the seeds that land on good soil, put down strong roots, and produce much fruit.

My prayer is that over these next weeks we will all learn to be more *rooted*: disciples all the way from the branches to the roots, and rooted in Jesus so we can produce much fruit.

I hope the second word is less difficult: *disciples*. I much prefer it to 'Christian', because the New Testament describes Jesus' followers as 'disciples' far more than 'Christians'. In fact it's the word Jesus *himself* uses to call people to follow him.

I was always taught to begin with the conclusion. So let's begin the series with the way John Stott ends his book, and keep these words in mind as week by week we explore that it means to be *Rooted Disciples*:

We cannot conclude better than to hear and heed the words of Jesus in the upper room:

You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am (John 13.13).

Basic to all discipleship is our resolve not only to address Jesus with polite titles, but to follow his teaching and obey his commands.

John Stott, The Radical Disciple, p. 137.

Who is Jesus? (27-33)

In 2006 Baywatch star David Hasselhoff was thrown out of Wimbledon. He tried to barge into the tennis players' private bar after drinking all day. As he was escorted out by security he yelled, 'All I want is a drink, do you know who I am?'

That is very much *not* the way Jesus asked his disciples (27), '**Who do people say I am?**' and then (29), '**What about you? Who do you say I am?**'

I wonder how *you* would answer that?

Notice the question isn't about who Jesus *actually* is. That, we don't get to decide for ourselves. Jesus *is* God's one and only Son, he *is* the Saviour, he *is* Lord. Jesus didn't ask, 'Who am I?'

No; he asked, '**Who do you say I am?**' It's a personal question, it's subjective not objective; what we think of Jesus doesn't affect who he is, but it does affect the way we respond to him.

Take Peter (29): '**You are the Messiah,**' he says. It's a great answer. 'Messiah' in Hebrew and 'Christ' in Greek mean the same thing; Peter was saying Jesus was chosen and anointed by God for a purpose – like the prophets, priests, and kings of old. Sounds great, but the devil was in the detail.

Immediately (31) Jesus **began to teach them** what it meant for him to be the Messiah: he would **suffer, be rejected, killed**, and then **rise again**.

I can understand why Peter and the disciples didn't like that. The Messiah was supposed to be a strong, all-conquering leader. The Messiah was supposed to be like king David: mighty in battle, strong to save. The Messiah was supposed to come in glory and majesty. The Messiah was supposed to *win*.

Peter used the right word – **Messiah** – but he meant the wrong thing. He was **rebuked** by Jesus in the harshest possible way (33): **'Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'**

Peter was **rebuked**, but not for being wrong. Mark tells us Jesus taught this message **plainly** (32) – so Peter's sin was not listening, his sin was insisting he knew better than Jesus. That is no small error, it is to act as God's enemy: **'Get behind me, Satan!'**

Friends, let that sink in for a moment. When we refuse to listen to God's word, when act as though we know better – we are on dangerous ground. It isn't a modern problem, it's the definition of sin: pride, and rebellion against God.

Discipleship (34-38)

Why did the Egyptian refuse to believe he was drowning?

Because he was in denial...

You are blessed this morning that there's only one denial pun in my sermon. Denying myself is not something I'm good at, which is why I've put on a stone and a half since moving here.

But that's not the self-denial Jesus is talking about .

I've already asked you one question this morning – here's another: 'What does it mean to be a disciple?' It's one of those words used a lot in the New Testament – but what does it mean?

It wasn't a word Jesus invented. It was common in those times for a teacher to gather about himself a group of disciples who would **learn** from him. When Jesus called the Twelve Disciples it wasn't unusual, though his choice of people was.

Jesus didn't invent having disciples, but he made something new out of it. And rather handily the Bible records for us what he said so we know what it means to be one of his disciples today.

It turns out Jesus' disciples learn from him, *and follow him* as leader and as the pattern or model for our lives as well – not as an all-conquering war hero, but the one who died to give us life.

Then Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Mark 8.34 (NIV)

Let's take those three things one at a time.

Deny yourself

First, Jesus says (34): **'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves.'** There isn't much in the Bible that is more counter-cultural than this. The world says: be true to yourself, follow your heart, express yourself. Jesus says: if you want to be my disciple, deny yourself.

This is about more than giving up stuff for Lent – although fasting is a bit like exercise that helps us build up our self-denial muscles. **Self-denial is not denying something to yourself, but denying your very self.** *Repeat*

This is so counter-cultural because Jesus and the world disagree on the state of the human heart. To our culture it stands for who we truly are. That means the highest good is giving people the freedom to follow their heart, to be themselves – and anything that stands in the way of that must be Bad.

In the Bible it's more complicated than that, a lot messier – and I would say a lot more true to my experience of my own heart.

Have you ever watched *The Repair Shop* on the BBC? It's one of my favourite TV programmes. I love watching the skill of the crafts-women and -men as they take faded and broken treasures and make them beautiful again. Often people have tried to repair things themselves, and then realise they need an expert – whose first job is to unpick the earlier attempts.

Friends *that's exactly what God does*. We are like the things people bring to *The Repair Shop*: broken, ripped, the paint is peeling off, some key parts are missing, our own repairs need unpicking so God can mend us properly.

Denying ourselves is a form of dying: dying to the pretence that our hearts don't need repairing, dying to the pretence that we can make any repairs ourselves, dying to the pretence that we aren't deeply broken and damaged by sin.

Unless we deny ourselves, unless we die to the pretence that we don't need repairing thank you very much, we will never come to God's repair shop; we will never ask him to save and heal us; we will never truly live. Jesus' disciples live – but only by dying first.

Take up your cross

Next Jesus tells us (34): **‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must take up their cross.’** Have you heard the phrase, ‘we all have our cross to bear’? That is *not* what Jesus means.

We mustn’t domesticate this. Jesus is not talking about patient endurance, ‘grin and bear it’, stiff upper lip, and all that. How good we are at watering down and domesticating the Bible!

As Jesus spoke these words, if someone had walked past carrying a cross, everyone would have known exactly what it meant: cruel and painful execution. That is what it meant for Jesus himself; here he teaches that the life of a disciple is cross-shaped.

What does that mean? For some disciples – both down the ages and still today – it means death. I hope you pray for our sisters and brothers around the world in that situation.

For all disciples it means sacrifice. Stepping out in mission is costly. It means dying to personal ambition and putting Jesus and the gospel first. Often it means mockery, challenge, opposition. Jesus taught that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it produces nothing – but if it does it produces a huge crop of seeds (John 12.23-25). Mission is cross-shaped.

God never promises immunity or deliverance from persecution – but he does promise to be with us always, and ultimately to give the crown of life to those who keep going. In Revelation 2.10 Jesus says, **‘Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.’**

Jesus’ disciples live – but only by dying first.

Follow me

A man arrived in A&E with horrible burns all over his feet.

‘How did this happen?’ asked the doctor?

The man replied, ‘The instructions on the can said, “Before opening, stand in boiling water for five minutes.”’

Finally, Jesus says (34): **‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must follow me.’**

What do you follow? I read the news in a not always healthy way: I confess to doom-scrolling. I support Liverpool FC – sort of. I keep an eye on technology and software developments. More seriously, in the blunt words of *The Book of Common Prayer*, I have followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart.

I follow some things half-heartedly; others I follow too much.

The sort of following Jesus has in mind is like following a guide up a mountain. You need to trust they know the way better than you, you need to stay close or you might end up getting seriously lost.

Following Jesus is about who's in charge. As the Christian cliché goes, Jesus is either Lord of all, or not at all.

Following Jesus means not letting our sinful, proud, rebellious hearts rule the roost, not indulging our broken and damaged desires. It means ignoring those things our itching ears want to hear – and listening to Jesus instead, to the words of Scripture God has given us to teach us, to rebuke us, to inspire us.

The world says, 'I did it my way'. Jesus say, **'Follow me.'**

It's not complicated – but neither is it easy. Following Jesus means not following *me*; to follow Jesus into abundant life we have to die to our stubborn insistence that we know the way. We don't.

The Bible holds out a wonderful and beautiful picture of life – and oh how much we want it! How much we long for the peace and glory and beauty of Jesus' life! God's life is there for all – for all who die to themselves, who let go of what we have so we can receive what God has for us, which is better by far.

The Refiner

I've been pretty negative about the human heart this morning, in an attempt to make the point that we can only live by dying first. There is much in our hearts that is damaged and broken – but there is also much good in there: we are not all bad! We are masterpieces, precious, loved by God, badly in need of repair.

In Malachi God is described as a refiner of gold and silver. To refine a precious metal the refiner places it into a crucible and puts it over a high heat. If the metal had feelings, it would *hurt*. As the metal melts, and as the refiner stirs, all the impurities – known as dross – float to the surface, where they can be removed. The refiner repeats this process until he is finished.

Do you know how the refiner knows the precious metal is ready?
It's ready when he can see his face in it.

Being a disciple of Jesus is a long and costly journey. Jesus is patient with us; he doesn't expect us to get there immediately. But the more we die to ourselves, the more we can receive his abundant life – and the more we reflect the glory and face of God.

ⁱ https://www.contactmusic.com/david-hasselhoff/news/hasselhoffs-wimbledon-rampage_1001596 retrieved on 30/01/2021.