

Lent Compline Talks 2015

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Conflicts with the disciples

Last week we looked at Jesus conflicts with his family; today we look at conflicts with his closest group of companions, the disciples/apostles.

Almost all of us in our daily lives have varying groups of people with which we interact closely. Most of us don't travel round the countryside with them trying to spread a message, but if we think of the forthcoming election, there will be numerous candidates going round trying to spread a message (or at least garner a vote) with a group of helpers, who might be thought of as disciples. In the coalition I read today that there is a row between Cameron who wants to ban extremist Islamic preachers from universities, and Vince Cable who There is no certainty that one's disciples will agree all the time! Not all Jesus disciples stayed with him throughout, we are told that "many" left after Jesus's teaching in a synagogue about his body as the 'bread of life'.

Any leader will pick as followers those who are like-minded. We don't know if Jesus knew the local fishermen by reputation, the gospels simply tell us that seeing Simon and Andrew fishing and James and John (sons of Zebedee) mending nets – he simply said "Come with me and I will make you fishers of men" and they left their jobs and followed (what Zeb said is not recorded!). Likewise Levi (Matthew) may have been known to Jesus as a local tax collector, but again we are told 'he got up, left everything'. Clearly Jesus was very charismatic, but he was also uncompromising about what being a disciple meant. One intending disciple asked permission first to go and bury his dead father, but was told 'let dead bury their dead – follow me'; similarly when another asks 'what more can I do – I've kept all the laws', he is told "sell all you have, give to the poor and follow me" (the man went away sad because he was very rich).

The twelve, then – with the group of women who went with them, and clearly many others, went round the Galilee rural villages. Jesus spent a lot of time teaching them, as well as teaching the crowd in parables which he then explained to the disciples. Also, he gave instructions 'Don't go to the Samaritans or Gentiles; just proclaim the good news of the kingdom.' At the feeding miracles in lonely places Jesus tests the disciples "I feel sorry for all these people; where are we to buy bread for all these people?" then the miracle. But they do not learn from this and later he says to them – and you can feel the exasperation 'Why do you talk about having no bread? Have you no inkling yet? Do you still not understand? Are your minds closed? You have eyes, can you not see? ears, can you not hear? Have you forgotten when I broke the 5 loaves and 2 fishes? Not conflict, perhaps, but exasperation with as of a schoolteacher with the dullest, most inattentive child. These were by and large simple fishermen, certainly uneducated, possibly illiterate; anyone who has had to have teacher spell things out in one-letter syllables can feel for the disciples as well as for Jesus as he tried to get his message across.

To start with the disciples can't have been certain of what Jesus powers were – perhaps much like a new cabinet brought together (particularly a coalition), so in the storm on the lake, they woke him 'don't you care that we are going to drown' (lose our seats); Peter, more bold, is invited and tries to walk toward Jesus on the water, but then his courage fails (we return to Peter's failures of courage later)

The disciples were clearly very protective of Jesus, but often it seems they did not understand. When the Canaanite woman with a mad daughter came the disciples wanted to send her away - "see how she keeps shouting after us" – I guess public embarrassment hits a raw nerve in many of us. Again they were protective when numerous mothers brought their children for blessing and the disciples told them to go away. But this time, Jesus combines it with teaching and called a child 'unless you become like a child you won't enter the kingdom of heaven; and if anyone causes a child to stumble it is better that he should have a millstone round his neck" Sometimes their very physical humanity lets them down as in the garden of Gethsemane when they are asked to stay awake and watch, but fall asleep. They try to be protective with a sword when Jesus is arrested, only to be told to put it away – this is what MUST happen.

On one occasion Peter's 'protection' really oversteps the mark. Shortly after being told that he was 'the rock' on which the church would be built' when Jesus speaks about his trial and death Peter began to rebuke him 'plainly' "Heaven forbid Lord, this must never happen to you", which brings the terrible retort "Get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block, you think as men think not as God thinks". Poor Peter, so open and enthusiastic. When Jesus is washing their feet at the last supper – 'Lord I'll never let you wash my feet' only to get the rebuke "If I don't, you are not in fellowship with me" Peter tries to recover "Not just my feet, my hands and my head also" only to get the gentler – "the feet is enough"

In any group of individuals a dominance hierarchy undoubtedly arises. It occurs in all groups of animals. The disciples were no different. On a number of occasions (Luke even places one at the last supper) they argue which is greatest. Either James & John (sons of Zebedee) or their Jewish momma asks Jesus if they can sit on his right and left in his Kingdom (we are told that, not surprisingly, the other 10 "were indignant"). Jesus asks "Can you drink the cup that I will drink? They say "yes" but it is clear that they like all the disciples except Peter flee when Jesus is arrested. Jesus of course turns this to teaching "whoever wants to be the greatest must be the servant (or willing slave) of all" – something our politicians would do well to have engraved on their bedroom ceiling to contemplate last thing at night. (We get a similar message with teaching on taking the lowest place at a banquet feast when invited).

The disciples try to learn the lessons of poverty and support of the poor, but they even get that wrong and are indignant when the woman with the expensive oil of nard anoints Jesus head "What a waste: it could have been sold and given to the poor". John attributes this to Judas (because was a thief and stole from the common purse). Strangely – since this is perhaps the greatest conflict with any disciple - this is the first time Judas is mentioned apart from being one of the twelve. We are told he went to the chief priest and asked what they would pay him to identify Jesus. Then at the last supper and Jesus announces that one of them will betray him, interestingly they don't say "Not me, Lord, never" but "can you mean me? Or "surely not me?" The answer to Judas is apparently "the words are yours" and Judas goes out into the night apparently, according to John, being told "do quickly what you have to do" which the others fail to understand.

So, for Jesus' disciples, there was sometimes conflict, but more often lack of understanding, insight and courage, lack of faith, and a taste for self-aggrandisement. For us 21st century disciples little has changed, and our responses like Peter's are often to hasty, too little thought through. How often must our Lord think of us in exasperation "Do you still not understand? Are you minds closed?". Let us pray that, this Lent, we may grow in understanding, insight and faith.