

Called and Equipped

Sunday 21st March 2010

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Readings:

Ephesians 4:1-13

Psalm 121

Matthew 4:18-22

Over these last couple of months we've been looking at some of the many benefits of belonging to Jesus ... recognizing that our calling to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ is an enormous privilege, and that God chooses to bless us in so many different ways. We have focused on his love for us, on the way in which he provides for us, and on the degree to which he values us ... that we are precious in God's sight.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of discipleship which we need to grasp is that we are *called*. Jesus said, and it is recorded for us in John chapter 15 (v16):

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last."

... which sounds very fine ... but what does it mean?

As disciples of Jesus we have been called, chosen and appointed ... and it is all for a reason. We are called, chosen and appointed in order to be fruitful in God's terms ... to make a difference in the Kingdom of God. We are called both to *be* and to *do*.

Take a look at our short gospel reading from Matthew 4.

Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, when he saw two brothers – Simon and Andrew - casting a net into the lake ... for they were fishermen. Two men simply doing their job ... ordinary men among many fishermen who worked the lake at that time ... and Jesus calls them:

"Come, follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men."

Matthew tells us that "*at once*" they left their nets and followed him.

Going on a little farther, Jesus saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also in a boat ... preparing their nets. According to Luke (5:7) James and John were business partners of Simon and Andrew. Jesus called them also, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

I wonder what Zebedee thought of being suddenly left to his own devices? ... and what these four men imagined it meant, that they were to be made 'fishers of men'? It all sounds very sudden and spontaneous. These men were leaving a steady career to go off who-knew-where to follow this itinerant rabbi. Whatever possessed them to do it?

When we read these few verses out of context, it sounds like a random encounter ... Jesus just wanders along, and spots two pairs of fishermen, and calls them to follow him ... but that was not quite it. There is some background to this calling.

Look back a few verses, to verse 13, and we discover that following his time of temptation and testing in the wilderness, Jesus had moved his base of operations. Until

then he had lived in Nazareth, where he was brought up ... but now he had gone to live in Capernaum, on the lakeside, which is where these fishermen lived and worked.

So ... this wasn't the first time Jesus had seen Simon and Andrew, or James and John. There was a family business based in Capernaum, and they must have been well-known around the town ... local businessmen are important members of a small-town community.

So in addition to the divine insight which he undoubtedly had into the character of these four men, Jesus also had the opportunity to size them up through simple human experience, and to get to know something of the sort of men they were. They were not perfect, of course, but reliable enough, and willing to work hard ... the sort of men who would be useful to have around ... men with potential.

And neither would it have been the first time they had encountered Jesus.

Since coming to Capernaum, Jesus had begun to preach:

"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near."

It was a similar message to that of John the Baptist, whose reputation had spread far and wide. But Jesus was an especially compelling preacher, and it is inconceivable that these men would not have heard him, whether in the local synagogue, which was just around the corner from Simon's home, or else out in the streets or on the lake shore.

Even so, their response is impressive.

Jesus took them off *throughout Galilee*, which is a large area when it comes to travelling on foot, and they must often have been away from home for weeks at a time, if not longer. It is obvious that the impression Jesus made on these men was powerful. He commanded their attention ... their respect ... and their loyalty.

Along with the others of the inner core who made up the twelve apostles, Simon and Andrew, James and John followed Jesus through three years of sometimes very difficult ministry. They sat at his feet and listened to his wisdom ... they watched as he performed amazing miracles ... they shared in his care for the poor and the despised.

From time to time they were sent out on mission, to practice what they had been learning from Jesus. They went out teaching and healing and preaching the Good News of the Kingdom in Jesus' name.

But for all their boldness, their bravery and their commitment, it is very apparent from the gospels that these disciples often got it wrong:

- they asked stupid questions.
- they quarrelled among themselves.
- they often missed the point of what Jesus was saying.
- they misunderstood Jesus' mission despite all that he told them.
- they even argued with him when he talked about dying and rising again.
- they made extravagant promises which Jesus knew they would fail to keep.
- they ran away, to their shame, when things turned really nasty.
- their faith wavered, and they very nearly gave it all up and went back to catching fish.

But for all their faults, Jesus loved them ... forgave them ... restored them and enabled

them – and they did indeed become 'fishers of men'. When they were sent out on mission, they preached repentance, they drove out demons and they healed the sick. They came back rejoicing in what they had seen God do through them.

This was only possible because the power of God was at work. As Jesus had called them, so he also equipped them ... and in all this he prepared them to carry forward the mission of the Church that Jesus founded, following his resurrection and ascension to the Father.

There's surely a lesson for us there about:

- stepping out in faith.
- learning on the job.
- taking the risk of getting it wrong.
- getting up when we fall, dusting ourselves down and starting again.
- trusting Jesus to see us through, despite our weaknesses and failings.

If Jesus equipped those he called to be his first disciples, in order that they could carry out his mission and ministry ... then why should he equip us any less, as those he has called to continue that work in our own time. We are their successors in ministry and mission ... just as in turn we will pass on the baton to the next generation, until Jesus returns in glory.

We know that as those who have responded to the call to become disciples of Jesus, we are unworthy and weak and often let Jesus down ... just as those first disciples did. We know we still have a very long way to go to become more like Jesus ... but the good news is that we have begun, and God is with us, and he invests himself in our progress because he loves us, and equips us for his work.

The Psalmist clearly understood this truth. In Psalm 121 he says:

"I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?"

Well, it's not from the hills, that's for sure!

The Psalmist continues:

"My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

If this was the assurance which the Psalmist had, how much more us who have come to know Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. He will watch over us ... he will protect us from harm ... his loving care for us extends into eternity. We are secure in him.

So, let's look at what Paul has to say to us about living this life of the disciple of Jesus. Paul calls us to *"live a life worthy of the calling you have received."* (Ephesians 4:1)

At one level, Paul is asking the impossible. We are not worthy of God's call, and we cannot make ourselves worthy of God's call. We are incapable of changing ourselves, other than superficially, and we are totally reliant on God to make us more Christ-like.

We are back with the Psalmist:

"My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

None the less, we have a responsibility to co-operate with God in his work of changing us. It is possible for us to resist the work of the Holy Spirit within us and refuse to change ... or we can open ourselves to his loving action and be transformed.

It seems to me that there are two main strands to Paul's message for us today. The first strand is about *Christian Character*, and the second strand is about *Gifting for Ministry*.

In other words, we need to consider that **who we are** is just as important as **what we do**.

Look first at those first few verses of Ephesians 4 (up to verse 6). These verses focus on our Christian Character.

What are the words and phrases which stand out as important?
(short discussion with those nearby)

Use OHP to gather words like:

Humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love, unity

Why are these so important in the family of the Church? (responses)

So, we are called to unity within the Body of Christ, and this only comes as we become more Christ-like. As God the Holy Spirit does his transforming work in us, making us more like Jesus, so we must inevitably grow closer to one-another.

When we are proud ... when we are harsh with one-another ... when we lack patience or become irritable ... when we are unloving in our thoughts, words, attitudes and actions ... then we are doing spiritual, physical and emotional damage to the Church which Jesus loved, and for which he laid down his life ... but when we allow the Holy Spirit to remould and shape and transform our character, so that we become humble and gentle, patient and forbearing, and practice the art of loving one-another, then the Church is strengthened and enabled to carry out its mission to the world who don't yet know Jesus.

Our unity and love for one-another should become a living picture of what Jesus called his Church to be ... sharing one hope in Jesus, with faith in him who saves us, baptised into one body, and loved by the one Father who is Father to us all.

So let's consider the second part of this passage, focusing on Gifting for Ministry.

In verse 7 we read: "*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*"

This is such an important verse, because it has so much truth in a very few words.

1. To each one of us.

There are no exceptions to this rule. If you are a Christian ... if you have come to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting him for your salvation, for the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life ... then this applies to YOU. "*To each one of us ...*"

You cannot be the odd one out ... there are none!

2. Grace has been given.

Not 'might be given' or 'will be given' but "*has been given.*" It is not conditional nor

prospective but actual. If you are a Christian, it cannot not true that God has not given you his grace. God is not miserly, but bountiful!

3. Christ apportioned it.

Grace is not something we can measure or evaluate. We are given what we need in order to fulfil God's purpose for our lives, and his purpose for each one of us is different. It is no good looking at others in the Church and wishing we had what they have ... it would not fit us! The choice is not ours but his.

What particular gifts and ministries does Paul mention here? (List on OHP)

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers.

What other gifts are mentioned in Scripture? (Add these):

(see 1 Corinthians 12:8-11 & 27-31):

Wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, faith, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation, apostles, teaching, miracles, healing, administration, help

(see Romans 12:6-8):

Prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leadership, mercy.

Grace, in the sense with which Paul is using the word here, is concerned with Gifts for Ministry, and there is no reason to imagine this list is exhaustive. New gifts are needed for new situations. God gives his Gifts to build up his Church in order that the Church may fulfil its purpose to do the will and work of God ... so we don't all need the same gifts.

A Church full of evangelists but with no-one to pastor the people would be a disaster ... so would a Church full of prophets, if there was no-one to teach the children ... or make the coffee ... or lead the singing ... or run the office. Every single one of us has a part to play, whether our ministry is up-front and public, or exercised quietly in the background.

God who has called us has also equipped us. Every individual has a unique mix of gifts which are theirs alone. It follows then, that if God gives us gifts which we fail to use, then the Church is deprived of a ministry which God intends us to have.

So, if you are sitting here this morning thinking "I don't have any gifts", then I have to tell you that cannot be right ... but it is very possible that you have yet to discover what that gift might be. Sometimes the Gifts which the Spirit gives us are obvious to everybody, but sometimes they can only be discerned through trial and error ... and sometimes God reveals them to somebody else.

If you are really not sure what God is calling you to do as your part in his body here at St Philip's, I do urge you to make an effort to find out ... and that may well begin by coming to pray with someone from the Prayer Ministry Team right here, straight after the service.

On the other hand, if God shows you that someone has a skill or ability that they have not recognised as a gift from God, then you have a responsibility to tell them. We need to have the courage to encourage one-another ... even if at times we make mistakes and get it wrong. After all, we are also called to be patient and forgiving with one-another!

Paul tells us that our aim, under God, is to "*become mature, attaining to the whole*

measure of the fullness of Christ." In other words, we seek to become all that God calls us to become, and to do all that which God calls us to do.

God does not want any of his children to be frustrated and under-used. He wants us all to be able to share in the joy and excitement of ministry, as each member of the body plays its part. For that to happen, we all need to grasp the truth that we are **called and equipped** by almighty God ... to take the plunge and get involved, and use the gifts which he had given us to good effect.