

# "Count yourself in"

Sunday 14 June 2009

Rev Brian Senior

## Readings:

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Psalm 32:1-5

Matthew 9:9-13

## Sermon

Today we begin a new sermon series based on Matthew's Gospel, on the theme of discipleship. Over these next few weeks we are going to explore together more of what it means to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hopefully, as we look together at various passages from Matthew, you will find strong connections with the material we are studying in our Home Groups. There we are looking at the reasons why we so often fail to be the spiritual superheroes we would like to be ... but recognising that Jesus chooses ordinary people like you and me to change the world.

If you are not a member of a Home Group at the moment, this would be a very good time to join one ... have a chat with me afterwards if you are interested.

What does the word 'Disciple' suggest to you?

*Get some feedback.*

Krish Kandiah, in the book I have based our Home Group studies on, talks about learning to drive. He writes:

"I hated my L-plates. Not only did I have to recover them several times from the sides of busy dual carriageways, as the magnets would lose sticking power after 50mph, but they were a constant reminder that I was a failure. I was 24, I owned a car, but I still hadn't passed my test. I had to find a chaperone everywhere I went, and I had to plan my routes to avoid motorways. As far as I was concerned, L stood for 'loser', not 'learner.'"

I don't know about you, but can so easily relate to what Krish is saying. I took my driving test when I was 21. I was very confident, because I had already passed my motorcycle test, so this was the first time in my life I was taking an exam which I fully expected to pass. I thought that having driven an overloaded car around Marble Arch on an August Bank Holiday Monday, that Maidstone midweek would be a walkover. I was wrong. It was almost certainly because of my overconfidence that I came unstuck. I failed.

Krish continues:

"Unfortunately, many of us feel the same about the label 'disciple'. It effectively means attaching an L-plate to the whole of our lives and allowing Jesus to instruct us, lead us and show us the way to go. We find it difficult to let that L-plate stick for long. Some of us feel so much like losers that we give up on discipleship altogether. Others of us feel that we have passed the standard of learner and moved on to become instructors in the church, and no longer have any need for L-plates."

What I hope we will discover this morning is that we share a common call to be disciples of Jesus ... and that in God's eyes none of us are 'losers', but all of us are 'learners'. As followers of Jesus we are on a journey of discovery together ... learning more and more about what it means to be disciples, and sharing together in the ministry and mission of the Church as the Lord teaches us by word and example, and equips us to live his new life.

We all know that Jesus was followed by great crowds of people who were eager to hear his teaching, and eager to experience the wonders he was doing ... such as healing the sick, and casting out demons ... but there was an 'inner core' of the twelve ... those who came to be known as his disciples – learners. They were the ones who would later become his apostles – those who were sent out to spread the Good News.

Having disciples wasn't Jesus' idea. In Jesus' time, every Rabbi, or teacher, would have his disciples ... and in Matthew 9, Matthew tells his own story of how he came to be one of them. Remember that Matthew, also known as Levi, was a Tax Collector ... a sort of double-agent for the Romans. He was implicated in their ill-treatment of the Jews. Not only did he collect taxes for their hated invaders, but he also got rich himself on the proceeds.

When Jesus saw Matthew sitting at the Tax Collector's Booth, he simply said "*Follow me,*" and Matthew got up and followed him ... and when the Pharisees questioned and criticised Jesus for mixing with a man like Matthew, and with other people they counted unworthy, he said: "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*"

What a contrast with the way things were usually done. We need to think about this in the context of a culture which was very different from our own.

Religion permeated every aspect of the lives of ordinary Jewish people. They saw themselves still as the chosen people, specially set aside by God, which they were. But they were also a nation in crisis. Having turned away from God, things had not gone well for Israel. They had been invaded, persecuted and shamed by a whole string of occupying nations ... and at this time it was the Romans, who were particularly cruel oppressors. Many were looking to God to come and save them ... to restore Israel's fortunes.

As I said before, every Rabbi had his disciples. A man would look around to compare different Rabbis, and decide which one he would like to learn from. The Rabbi would then consider the potential of the man who had approached him, and decide whether or not he was willing to take him on as a disciple.

It was a great honour to be the disciple of a particularly respected Rabbi. Saul the Pharisee, for instance, who became the apostle Paul, believed himself to be especially privileged to have studied under a famous Pharisee called Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council) who was honoured by all the people (Acts 5:34)

Disciples were followers and learners ... apprentices who watched their teacher carefully in order to imitate his life ... picking up the skills and the lifestyle of their Rabbi in order to do what he did, and live as he lived. Imitation, they say, is the highest form of flattery. A disciple would spend several years following his Rabbi, and form a deep personal relationship with him.

So Jesus, too, had his disciples. But there was a difference, as we have seen already from Matthew's experience. Matthew hadn't been looking for a Rabbi to follow ... he was too busy making money ... instead, Jesus called him.

This was true of all those who became 'the twelve'. *How many can you name?*

**[Simon (Peter), Andrew, James & John (sons of Zebedee), Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew (Levi), James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddeus / Judas (son of James), Simon the Zealot, Judas Iscariot.]**

Though some of these men had shown an interest in his teaching, it was Jesus who called them, not the other way around. This was a point which Jesus reminded them of later in his ministry, as he was preparing them for his death ... and it is a point which we do well to take on board for ourselves. In John 15 (v16) Jesus says to his disciples:

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

These men spent three years with Jesus their Rabbi - watching him, listening to him, questioning him, learning from him ... being sent out by him on short-term mission, seeking to imitate him - but also misunderstanding him, disappointing him, and failing him.

The disciples must often have felt that they were unworthy ... just as we often feel unworthy as his disciples today. But Jesus reminded them that they were chosen by him, and he was not going to give up on them.

On the contrary, they were his chosen leaders for the early Church, and his chosen means to spread the Good News about himself in Jerusalem, in Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth ...

.. and we who he has called to himself are his chosen people for our own time.

When you feel inadequate and unworthy, just remind yourself what they were like:

- some uneducated fishermen
- a rebel on the verge of violent uprising
- a despised tax collector working for the enemy
- and a few about whom we know almost nothing, other than that Jesus called them.

There are some people around who think that they don't need God in their lives... either because they are good enough already, or because they can get on perfectly well on their own. But there are, I think, far more people who think they are not good enough for God.

Matthew's story shows us that this just isn't true. He was despised by his fellow countrymen for collaborating with the Romans, and defiled by his handling of their dirty money ... but Jesus called him anyway. What Matthew had been, and what Matthew now was, was no barrier to what Matthew could become in Jesus.

The point is not that sin doesn't matter – far from it. The damage which sin does was so great that it cost Jesus a painful death on a Roman cross to overcome its power. The

point is that God's love is such that it does overcome the power of sin, so that whatever we may be, and whatever we may have done ... through Jesus we can be forgiven and free.

Discipleship is not all about success ... it is about an attitude of heart and mind, worked out by God's help in practical Christian living ... it is about being submitted to Jesus, and letting the Holy Spirit work in our lives so that we can become more like him.

Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi (Philippians 2:3-8):

*"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"*

Avoiding selfish ambition?

Thinking of others as better than ourselves?

An attitude of humility like that of Jesus himself?

Being prepared to be a servant?

These things aren't easy. As disciples:

- We will often get it wrong – so did the the first disciples.
- We will often let the Lord down – so did the first disciples.
- We will often wish we had done better – so did the first disciples.

... but Jesus forgives us, just as he did them ... and restores us, dusts us down, and sets us on our feet again.

When Matthew the embezzler became Matthew the believer, he told it exactly as it was .. no covering up the struggles and the failures. In his Gospel Matthew relates exactly what was going on, even if that meant showing himself or the others in a poor light ... the misunderstandings, the squabbles, the betrayal and the desertion ... nothing is hidden.

By showing us the worst and the best of the disciples, Matthew gives us hope. If Jesus chose these to be his best friends and the first missionaries, then surely he can use us too.

I wonder how many of you followed the last series of "The Apprentice"?

... something of a guilty pleasure, I know ... but I tell myself it's OK to watch these people making fools of themselves, because they must have known what they were getting into.

Sir Alan Sugar and his colleagues, Margaret and Nick, spend weeks making critical assessment of the candidates, and especially identifying their faults and weaknesses, until eventually Sir Alan points at someone across the boardroom table and says: "You're fired."

... only on the last week does one candidate get to hear: "You're hired!"

It's not like that with Jesus. He's not in the firing business. Jesus said (John 6:37b):

*"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."*

There is one similarity ... sort of ... between Alan Sugar hiring his apprentice and Jesus taking us on as his disciples.

When Alan Sugar chooses his apprentice, that is when the real work begins. He or she isn't hired because they are perfect, but because Sir Alan can see their potential. So once they are hired, then the real learning process can begin.

In the same way, Jesus takes us on as disciples although we are far from perfect. He loves us as we are, but he also loves us far too much to let us stay as we are. He can see our potential, and he begins a work in us, through his Holy Spirit, to bring about change.

If we are honest, we all know that we have rough edges which need to be smoothed ...

- Some of us are too impatient of other people.
- Some of us know that our commitment to Jesus is a bit wobbly.
- Some of us think far too much of ourselves.
- Some of us are much too inclined to be critical.
- Some of us find it hard to forgive others, even though we have been forgiven.
- Some of us are less loving than we ought to be, towards our partners or our children.

There are aspects of our nature that are less than even we would wish them to be. God's purpose in bringing us to Jesus is to help us to grow in holiness, which is really another way of saying that he wants to make us more like Jesus.

Our reading from 1 Timothy 1 is a great example of this. Paul writes about how God has changed him, and how grateful he is that God has appointed him to his service ... he has made him a disciple.

Paul's history was pretty grim. As a Pharisee he had persecuted the infant Church. He was there when Stephen, the first Christian Martyr, was stoned to death, giving his approval. He had been on his way to Damascus to arrest Christian believers and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains to be put on trial, when he met with the risen Lord Jesus ... and his life was completely turned around.

So Paul writes (1 Timothy 1:15):

*"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst."*

The wonderful truth is that Jesus sees the potential in all of us. None of us are hopeless cases as far as he is concerned. We can all be saved by him and changed by him.

Remember the words of the Psalmist (Psalm 32:1f):

*"Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him."*

Jesus Christ is calling us to him ... to know him, to receive his forgiveness, to be saved by him, and to be his disciples. The choice is ours to make freely.

The door is always open, and there is a place for everyone.  
We are all hired if we want to be! ... Count yourself in.