

Luke 9:18-36

Introduction

It's been a real pleasure to baptise Rich and Tiff this morning. It's always a great joy to baptise new believers. It's what Jesus told us to do. He said, **'Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...'** (Matt. 28:19). Baptism is a sign of Christian discipleship.

But what *is* Christian discipleship? What does it *look like* to be a disciple of Jesus?

That's what this passage, that we just head read for us, is all about. We've been working our way through chapters 8 and 9 of Luke's book in the Bible, in which he tells us about the life of Jesus. And in our passage this morning, Luke tells us about two incidents that happen 8 days apart. Both begin with Jesus in prayer. Both involve a step forward in the disciples' understanding of who Jesus is. And both teach us something about Christian discipleship. I take it that those three things are connected. We're not told what Jesus was praying about, but given the context, I think we can safely infer that he was asking God the Father to enable his disciples to grasp more clearly who he is. Because, as we'll see, it's only when we understand who Jesus is that we can understand what it means to be his disciple. We all need God's help to see the true identity of Jesus. So, I'm going to pray a little prayer now, and ask God the Father to do the same for each one of us here this morning.

Let me say a prayer.

Loving, heavenly Father. Thank you for the accounts of Jesus' life that we have recorded for us in the pages of the Bible. As we read this portion of Luke's account now, please help each one of us here to understand who Jesus is. Please open our eyes to see clearly his true identity. And please help us to understand what it means to follow him. In his name we pray. Amen.

So then, what is Christian discipleship?

These two incidents teach us two things. The first is that Christian discipleship involves radical self-denial. And that's our first heading: radical self-denial.

Radical self-denial

Please look down again with me at verse 18.

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?'

Jesus breaks off his prayers to ask the disciples this question. And they report the rumours and speculation that has been flying around. Verse 19.

They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.’

Those are all holy men of God. So, these are favourable suggestions. People are identifying Jesus as some kind of prophet. A holy man. That’s right. But their answers don’t go far enough. Jesus is more than a prophet. So, Jesus asks the same question of his disciples. Verse 20.

‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

Jesus is getting personal. The Christian faith *is* personal. As we read about Jesus, we must all answer that same question: ‘Who do you say I am?’ We must each decide for ourselves what we make of Jesus. And the answer that comes from the disciples is a bit of a surprise. So far in Luke’s book, we’ve seen them struggle to grasp Jesus’ identity. But now, suddenly, they take a big step forward, presumably, as an answer to Jesus’ prayer. Verse 20.

‘But what about you?’ [Jesus] asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

Peter answered, ‘God’s Messiah.’

Boom! That’s a big moment. This is the first time in Luke’s book that any of the disciples identify Jesus as the Messiah. Peter’s probably acting as the spokesman for all the disciples. And they finally recognise in Jesus the long-awaited King whom God had promised long ago. He is the King who will establish God’s kingdom and bring in all the blessings of God’s rule. What a moment! But immediately Jesus tells them to keep it to themselves. Verse 21.

Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.

And he tells them *why* they must keep it to themselves in verse 22.

And he said, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.’

The disciples have seen the miracles Jesus has done. They’ve witnessed his power and authority first hand. They’ve seen with their own eyes, his power and authority over nature, over demons, over sickness, even over death. And, finally, they recognise Jesus to be the Messiah, God’s long-awaited King. But without verse 22, their understanding of his kingship is woefully incomplete. They won’t be ready to tell people about him until they’ve understood the kind of king Jesus is. And that’s because people were expecting a very different kind of king. They expected that when the Messiah came, he would come in glory. He would be a great military ruler who would lead his people in battle and free them from the oppression of the Roman empire. When *he* came there would be no mistaking it. The whole world would see his glory and bow before him.

Perhaps that's how you think today. If God's king were to come into the world, surely there would be no mistaking it. His glory would be evident for all to see. The newsfeeds would be full of it. The things he said and did would be all over social media. Everyone would know.

But Jesus says, no, that's not right. I've not come in glory as you measure it. Instead, I've come to suffer, and be rejected and killed, and then rise again. Only then will you see my glory. That's what his disciples need to learn. And notice that Jesus says these things *must* happen. It is absolutely necessary for him to suffer and die. He's saying that this is the way it has to be.

That's because of God's love for those who rebel and sin against him. By nature, we all rebel and sin against God. We all deserve his just judgement and the penalty of death. But in his love and mercy, God willed, in eternity past, to take away the sins of his people and restore them to himself. And this is the only way for that to happen. Jesus came into the world to give himself to *death* for his people, so *they* might live. He *is* God's King. One day, he *will* be revealed in all his glory. But he came into the world to walk a path that led to glory only through death. And being his disciple means walking the same path. His life is the pattern for our own. That's what we must grasp if we're to be his disciples.

Look at verse 23.

Then he said to them all: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'

To be a disciple of Jesus is to live a life of radical self-denial. That means more than giving up chocolate. It means taking up your cross, Jesus says. Again, that means more than putting on a piece of jewellery. In Jesus' day, someone who carried a cross was going to one place only. They were going to their death. The Romans made those they crucified carry their own crosses to the place of execution. To take up your cross is to die.

That's the radical self-denial that Jesus is calling for. It's to die to our old way of life and to renounce our presumed right to do as we please. That, after all, is the essence of sin. We all like the idea of doing what we want with our lives. We push God to one side and live as we please, with no regard for him. We want to live 'my way', as 'I' please, with 'me' in charge. It's what the Bible calls sin. And it's *this* rebellion against God that brings us under his condemnation and the penalty of death.

But that is why Jesus came. In his love for rebels and sinners, he came to die the death we deserve in our place, so that we might live. And following him means giving up our right to live as we please and living a new life in keeping with his teaching. And notice that we're to do that daily, in verse 23. Not once but continually. Day by day. Every day.

Please forgive me for illustrating this with a slightly silly picture but let me introduce you to my friend Mr Pizzaman.

Here he is.

And this is what we might think Christian discipleship looks like. The circle is my life. And it can be divided into different segments. There's home. Work. Family. Friends. Money. And there's Jesus. Being a Christian is about having him as a part of my life. But that's not what Jesus is describing here. To live this way is still to live as though I'm the one in charge. It's still living life on my own terms as though I'm the king.

What Jesus is describing looks more like this. Following him isn't merely one segment of my life. Following Jesus means living with him in charge of everything. It's a radical change of life. It involves surrendering every area of our lives – our hopes and dreams; our work and money; our sexuality and relationships; our homes and possessions, all of it – to the kingship of Jesus and living the way he wants.

And notice that four-letter word popping up again in verse 23: **'Whoever wants to be my disciple *must* deny themselves...'**

This isn't optional. It's necessary. Jesus is saying, if you don't want this kind of discipleship, then don't follow me.

And he goes on in verse 24: **'For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.'**

Even if we could have everything we wanted in life. The house. The job. The car. The money. The holidays. The relationships. The sex. The stuff. If we could have it all. Even then, that would be nothing compared to the joys and blessings of knowing God, both now and in eternity. And that's what we stand to lose.

Jesus is saying that to live for all of *that* – all that the world lives for – is the way to *lose* my life. If I live now by my rules, pursuing what I think is valuable and beneficial, judging for myself what I think is right and wrong, then I'm living as though I am God, and ultimately my life is forfeit. If I want to save my life, eternally, I must surrender it wholly to Jesus and trust him to be in charge. And you and I can do that because we know that he loves us and understands what's best for us. You do the maths, Jesus says. You decide whether it's worth it.

That's what was signified in Rich and Tiff's baptism earlier. As they went down into the water, it signified dying to their old way of life, living as though they were in charge. Then as they came up out of the water, it signified rising to new life with Jesus in charge of everything.

As we read these verses, we must all ask ourselves whether this is what *our* lives look like. Am I living with Jesus in charge of everything in every area of my life? Or are there areas of my life in which I'm still clinging on to my right to be in charge? Are there still areas of my life in which I need to take up my cross and deny my desire to do as I please and follow Jesus? If so, am I willing to do it?

That's the question we *must* ask ourselves if we're to be his disciples. And the next few verses assure us that it *is* worth it.

It's not clear what Jesus is referring to in verse 27, when he says, '**Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.**' He might be referring to the transfiguration, which we're about to read about. He might be referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He might be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, which would be a foretaste of coming judgement. He might be referring to all those things. They all happened within a lifetime. But his point is that his disciples are those who will give up living for the things of this world and live instead for the coming kingdom of God. And the future glory of that kingdom is what we get a glimpse of next.

We're going to look at these verses very quickly. And I've put as our second heading: Future glory.

Future glory

Again, in verse 28, Jesus is praying. And in verse 29, we're told that: **as he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus.**

Moses and Elijah are two heroes of Israel's past through whom God advanced his great plan of salvation. Their appearance here with Jesus in glorious splendour confirms that his coming is the continuation of that plan. And in verse 31, we're told that they spoke with Jesus about his departure, or more literally, his 'exodus'.

The Exodus is the name given to God's great act of salvation in the past. Through Moses, God had rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt. But now an even greater rescue was about to be come about. It would be accomplished through Jesus' death. And it would happen in Jerusalem. It's the pinnacle of God's great plan of salvation: Jesus' sacrifice of himself on a cross to rescue his people from their slavery to sin and death. That's what Jesus is talking about with Moses and Elijah. What a conversation that must have been. Wouldn't you have loved to listen in! And wanting to stop the moment from slipping away, Peter offers to put up shelters for the three men before Moses and Elijah depart. He wants this moment to last.

But before he can finish what he's saying, he and the other disciples are covered by a cloud. And they hear a voice speaking to them from the cloud. It's God's voice.

Look at verse 35.

A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; *listen to him.*'

At the beginning of chapter 8, in the Parable of the Sower, Jesus compared himself to a farmer sowing seed. The seed is the word of God. And Jesus said, '**Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.**'

Now we know what his message is about. It's the message of his death and resurrection. And it's the message of discipleship that involves radical self-denial today followed by glory to come. And in case we are tempted to doubt whether this can really be the best way to live, God the Father speaks to us from the cloud, saying, '**This is my Son, whom I have chosen; *listen to him.*'**

We can trust what Jesus is saying.

God the Father is affirming the identity of Jesus. He's affirming the mission of Jesus. He's affirming what it means to be disciples of Jesus today. And as we catch a glimpse of the glory of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, we're also catching a glimpse of the glory that lies ahead for all who take up their cross and follow him.

Will you do that?

Will you deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Jesus?

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you that Jesus came to establish your kingdom, a glorious kingdom, in which you reign with love and mercy. Thank you for graciously granting us a place in your kingdom through faith in him. Please help us to deny ourselves and follow him, trusting in his death and resurrection, and following the example that he has set for us. Please help us to surrender every area of our lives to his loving rule. And as we do, please help us to keep our eyes fixed on the glory to come when he returns. In his name we pray. Amen.