

Evensong meditation 18.7.10

1 Corinthians 4. 8 – 13

I've just come to the end of a year long 3D course. The 3Ds stand for developing diocesan disciples and the course is run every year by the diocese of Birmingham in a number of churches throughout the city. At the final session of the course we looked back at what we had learned from the course over the year and we looked forward to think about where next in our journey of faith. In many ways the 3D course was a beginning as well as an end, because we were all able to take away from it a whole range of knowledge and insights that will help us in the future. We're still developing disciples.

When I read the passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, I wondered what the Corinthians might have made of a 3D course. I suspect that had it been offered, they would have refused, saying that they had no need of such a course, since they had got Christianity sorted out and were very well endowed, spiritually speaking.

The church at Corinth was a source of both joy and sorrow for Paul. Joy, because he managed to establish a church here and sorrow, because they then began to argue amongst themselves and give themselves spiritual airs and graces. One of the Bibles that I looked at in preparation for this evening had the heading 'the last place to start a church'. Corinth was not noted for its squeaky clean reputation; in fact the Greek verb 'to corinthianise' meant to live shamelessly. On a recent trip to New York, our bus tour guide said of Greenwich Village: 'if you see a dog kissing a cat then you know you're in Greenwich.' In other words, anything goes. That was certainly true of Corinth. If you wanted debauchery with a capital D, you headed for Corinth. If you wanted to join the most bizarre religious cults, you headed for Corinth.

It's interesting to look at the audiences for Paul's letters and the difference between them, because there are differences. He writes with a specific audience and context in mind. This letter to the Corinthians is one from the heart. Here we don't see the well thought out theology of Romans, presented step by step with irrefutable logic. Rather we see Paul appealing to the Corinthians to mend their ways and it's clear how their behaviour both frustrates and hurts him. In the passage we heard tonight we have a rather sarcastic aside in verse 8 where Paul says he wishes that the Corinthians really had become kings so that he could be one too.

But then Paul turns things upside down as he often does. He describes the life of an apostle as being the very opposite of what the Corinthians think it is. It's not some kind of celebrity lifestyle. What does Paul tell us? It's like being the condemned man, a fool, being always hungry and thirsty, homeless, being persecuted and slandered. In verse 13 he says: 'we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.' The words 'reality check' come to mind here. The Corinthians had lost sight of the true path of discipleship.

Now, maybe St Peter's isn't the racy and misguided place that was Corinth, but I'd like to suggest that we can all take something away from this passage about the nature and cost of discipleship.

It would be quite superficial I think to take this passage at face value and just think about discipleship as a path of endurance, a bit like the ten labours of Hercules. We might read this passage and wonder: 'who in their right mind would sign up to a religion that involves all these miseries?' We might also wonder, 'where's the joy and pleasure?' This is one of the dangers of taking passages out of context. So I'm not going to do a verse by verse unpicking of what Paul specifically says in this passage but rather I'm going to use this passage as a springboard for sharing a few thoughts about discipleship.

The first thing to say is that our lives are transformed through faith in Christ. St Pauls talks about this transformation in Romans: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.' But having been transformed, we generally do not opt out of the world: we are 'in the world but not of the world'. So I'd like to suggest that discipleship is about managing this juxtaposition. How do we juggle the sacred and secular without them being compartmentalised?

In his book 'Exploring the Christian Faith' Hubert Smith makes three useful observations that relate to discipleship: our attitude to God, our attitude to oneself and our attitude to other people. In a nutshell, he describes our attitude to God as 'God consciousness', that is fed by being part of a worshipping community. Attitude to self is about humility and unselfishness and attitude to others is the fundamental command of Jesus: 'love your neighbour as yourself'. So managing the spinning plates of sacred and secular might involve these three attitudes.

There's an awful lot implied in this three part summary of discipleship and it's perhaps no wonder that the cost is high. But isn't that fundamentally what discipleship is about, not counting the cost? It's not that we deliberately seek out hunger, thirst, slander, brutal treatment and all the rest, but that we know the risks and still go ahead. Perhaps that's what being a fool for Christ is about. If discipleship were subject to a risk assessment, we might not bother getting out of bed. But don't forget also that risks can be thrilling as well as scary. I'm not suggesting that Christianity is some kind of cheap thrill, but that there is the potential for immense joy in discipleship. Peter says in his first letter: 'Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.'

I'd like to finish with two points about discipleship.

First, it's about work in progress. Paul rebuked the Corinthians because they thought that the job was done, they knew it all and had no need of spiritual growth. I'd like to suggest that we are lifelong disciples that we will always change, grow and develop. In the baptism service we say: 'fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the

world and the devil and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.' So we're not in it for short term gains or some neat ending.

Second, discipleship isn't something that happens in isolation. Yes, we might have our personal journey of faith and discipleship, but we are part of the body of Christ and as such have a fellowship of believers with whom we can and should share the joys and sorrows. Discipleship is a shared responsibility. The Diocesan initiative, Transforming Churches, is a long term strategy plan for the church in the 21st Century which has as its overall goal 'growing churches at the heart of each community'. One of the seven areas of transformation is about transforming disciples. I'd like to read what it says about disciples:

'We are disciples in every part of our lives – at home and at work.....in our relationships and leisure time and through our contributions to the mission and ministry of the church. For this, we need confidence in our knowledge of the Christian faith, and in our ability to act and speak as followers of Jesus.'

So, to end where I began, one of the ways in which my discipleship has been enhanced and transformed is by attending a 3D course and I would encourage others to consider following this course. One of the questions that Transforming Churches asks about discipleship is: 'In what ways are those of all ages being equipped to live as Christian disciples on a Monday as well as on a Sunday?' I'd like to suggest that 3D is one of those ways. Amen.

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