

Following Jesus

1. “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” John 6v66

These words are the context to our passage this morning. Many of Jesus' followers were no longer walking with him on the journey of discipleship.

The bible speaks of God's people as being a peculiar people.

Paul's letter to Titus in chapter 2 v14, has the words, "Jesus gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works". KJV

If we look up the word *peculiar* in a dictionary today, we will still see that the oxford dictionary gives as one of its meanings, "belonging exclusively."

However, probably the most common usage of the word *peculiar* today is referring to someone or something that is strange, odd, or uncommon. That's the first meaning of the word in the dictionary, the second is "belonging exclusively" and the KJV uses this.

The word peculiar is translated from a Greek word which is made up of two words, one which means around as in a circle and the other which means "to be" which means we exist – "to be or not to be" said Hamlet.

So, this can be understood with our circle and dot.

The circle monopolises the dot and has the dot exclusively all to itself.

So, God has his own all to himself. We are peculiar because we belong exclusively to God. We are his own private unique possession. He has us them for himself. He has chosen us.

So, when we speak of Christians as being a peculiar people, we don't mean that they are odd but that they are in a special relationship with God, surrounded by his love and grace; a place of high privilege, and we experience this grace and favour through the love of Jesus.

We enter the circle through Jesus and become his follower. One theologian wrote, "What a pillow on which to rest our weary hearts when going through a testing time."

In this world of testing and trials we have a God who invites us into his nearer presence.

Do you know yourself to be in the circle of God's grace?

This is a place of high privilege. This is place of security and a place of belonging.

When Jesus called people to follow him, he was calling them into a relationship that was based on the love of God. He was calling them to follow him, for Jesus is at the centre of this relationship with his Father. He said that he and his Father are One. When we come to faith, and turn from our sin, and follow Jesus, we are in his Kingdom, and the circle represents his Kingdom and outside of the circle is the Kingdom of the world, and we live within two kingdoms, the Scriptures tell us.

We have a duty to both kingdoms, but first and foremost our duty is to Christ's kingdom. This is the Kingdom that will last forever.

Jesus is experiencing many of his followers turning back and no longer following him.

In effect, they were jumping out of the circle, they had broke rank and had quit.

They were happy when Jesus was performing miracles and feeding people and healing the sick but now it has become a bit serious – he was talking about sacrifice; he was talking about what it would cost them. They were fair weather disciples; they were like Mr Pliable in Pilgrim's Progress. He bent with the wind and turned back – how sad.

But Jesus knew this would happen; and so, should we; think of Jesus' parable of the farmer sowing the seed; he said that the seed fell on four different types of ground, Luke 8 v4-15.

Some seed fell on the path, the path was hard and solid and so the seed had no chance of penetrating the ground, as soon as it landed, birds saw it to be their lunch, this represented the mind that was closed to the gospel, the hard heart;

then there was rocky ground and the seed that fell there had little chance, the soil was shallow, underneath was limestone and so the roots had no chance of going deep, this was the person who didn't think it through, who was shallow in their commitment and so there was no moisture in the ground and it didn't take long for the plant to die;

the third ground was full of weeds, I can picture Himalayan balsam plants, and as soon as the plant took root and started to grow, the weeds began to choke the life out of the plant, this is the person who is too busy, someone once said, “the worst enemy of the best is the second best”. Three types of grounds and all were unsuitable for growing a mustard seed plant.

But there was a fourth type and that was the good ground, the soil was deep and clean and well prepared, this is the good heart, the one who hears and does good things, they listen attentively, they store what they hear in their mind and heart, they think it, and build on its foundation. In summary, this person puts into practice what they have heard.

What type of ground are we?

Hard, rocky, too busy or receptive?

So, Jesus looks closely at his disciples and says, are you going to turn back also?

2. Have I not chosen you the twelve, yet one of you is a devil. 6v70

This morning, it would be remiss of me not to address these words of Jesus, “have I not chosen you, yet, one of you is a devil” – in other words, there is a devil amongst you”. Now that’s a sobering thought isn’t it! That’s a bomb shell that’s been dropped into their party.

These words are the conclusion of this amazing discourse about Jesus being the bread of life and he finishes with this challenge, one of you is a devil!

Who could this be?

Yes, we know who is it is!

But to those first disciples, what must they have thought?

The devil amongst us and suddenly they are looking at each other and all begin to feel guilty – wouldn’t you? Is it me? Is it him? And they think to themselves, who the hell is this devil?

I mean that in the right sense!

Because the comfort is that this devil is going to hell. This is the destiny of the devil of this world. Jesus knows this. The devil has caused nothing but carnage, from the beginning of the world; his sole purpose is to destroy God's work, and to sow seeds of evil.

He has been there since God created the world; the bible tells us that he was cast out of heaven because he tried to take God's place, and he comes crawling on his belly on earth as a snake, and at times masquerading as an angel of light to destroy God's work. – these are not my thoughts, these are the thoughts of the bible and it does sound a bit sci-fi.

But that is the response to evil that the bible gives, and were told that he's going to hell, and all his demons with him. There is a time coming when there will be no more pain or suffering for the one who has caused it, is no longer on our midst.

“Have I not chosen you, yet, there is a devil amongst you” said Jesus.

Now, we know the devil he is referring to: the one who had his hand in the money bag, the one who was about to turn him in, the one whose heart was never really with Jesus.

But I love how Jesus handles this situation, he doesn't confront him; he lets him run his course, he lets the wheat and the tares grow together until the end, for if he uproots the weeds, he might also uproot the tares because Jesus knows the whole story; where does evil come from? as we look out into the world it's not too difficult to say, the devil is amongst us – what other explanation do we have?

It's not the work of a good and loving God that people should suffer, infact, we often speak of God being there in the midst of suffering bringing his healing and bringing his peace, his angels at work; but why is there evil and suffering? well here's the answer, given directly from Jesus, the devil is amongst you, and he has come to divide and create havoc – but his time is limited, God is about to bring resurrection and new life and a new order and a new heaven and earth and all that is wrong will be cast out.

This morning, we reach a challenging passage in John's gospel. It is a passage about discipleship.

Discipleship in its simplest form means following Jesus; Jesus called twelve disciples to follow him but he had many more as our passage instructs us today, and what we discover is that many of the disciples, the wider circle, were no longer walking with him, they were grumbling, they were offended by his teaching.

Quitting – giving up – throwing in the towel – choosing an easier way – that’s what was happening – how did Jesus feel when many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a man that I've mentioned before, and a man who was a great example of discipleship – infact, he wrote a book from his German prison, “The cost of discipleship” – because he of people knew, that discipleship comes with a cost.

A phrase that he used often, “Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ.”

At the age of 11, Bonhoeffer decided that he would become a theologian; he was brought up in home where his parents were non-church goers, but they had sympathies with the German evangelical church. By the time Bonhoeffer was 21, he had gained his doctor of theology degree.

His studies took him to America, and it was at this time that he became a committed follower of Jesus.

He could have carved out for himself a comfortable life in America, but he believed that he was called to return to Germany during the uprising of Hitler, believing that if he wasn’t present during the troubles, he had no right to return in the upbuilding of the country.

He opposed the Nazi regime, and challenged the passive evangelical church to make a stand against Hitler. He was eventually imprisoned for being accused of planning to assassinate Hitler and he was executed on the final days of the war.

In prison he wrote his classic book, “Cost of discipleship” and for Bonhoeffer the cost for him was his life. Before going into prison he could have escaped from Germany, but he chose to remain and be a disciple of Jesus.

Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy in any generation and it is certainly not easy today.

C. S. Lewis wrote “You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.” That’s what Jesus does.

Have I not chosen you, said Jesus?

Words for us also today, God says to us, as Jesus said, are you about to turn and leave, have I not chosen you?

We are in the circle, not because of anything we have done to deserve it but simply because God has made it possible, he has chosen us to be in his circle, in his Kingdom. He has chosen us to be a disciple.

If he has chosen us – why would we want to leave?

The story is told of a sculptor who loved his only son. He had many statues in his art gallery which he had cut out of rough granite in the course of his lifetime. But now he has come to the decision, that he would like a group of statues, all made in the very image of his only Son. So, he goes to the stone quarry, and after some deliberation selects some large blocks of granite which the quarrymen have blasted out of the mountainside. One might question his selection, for they appear to be the least promising from all those, he had to choose. There they were scarred by the weather, discoloured and cracked.

Isn't that what God has done in eternity before his universe was created, the divine sculptor, God, had it in his heart to make some images of his perfect son, the Lord Jesus, not carved out of granite, but moulded from living personalities. He could have chosen angels but some of them had already turned away from him, so he chose inferior material, lost human beings, me and you, creatures who are not perfect. He chose us, the most unlikely material and from red clay, he breathed the breath of life. He chose us to be like his Son. "Haven't I chosen you", said Jesus.

After the sculptor had selected the blocks of granite, he placed on each one a tag, which simply said, "chosen – to be conformed to the image of my son", they were labelled for this one destiny.

So, the divine sculptor chooses us to be conformed to the image of his son, and he starts work on us. The granite is irregular, scarred, cracked, rough and discoloured. A visitor enters his studio and questions, why he is using this poor looking material for the statue of his son.

The sculptor said, "I receive far more satisfaction and fame from using inferior material and turning out a superior piece of work. You are directing your criticism against these rough bits of granite. I do not see these when I work, I have in mind the finished product, and that will be perfect. You are not touching the statue of my son with criticism, but rather these blocks of granite, I see them as perfect, conformed already to the image of my son".

“I have assumed responsibility for choosing inferior granite. I'm doing it for the sake of the finished product”.

Satan enters the studio of the divine sculptor and comments on the imperfections of the statues, “how weak, unfaithful, how prone to sin”, he said. The sculptor lifts his head and says, “Your charges may be true, but I am not looking at the material upon which I am working but at the finished product. I took upon myself at calvary all their sins. I made myself of no reputation. Their sins have been paid for and put away. I see each one a saint now, perfect, sinless, shining, with all the beauty of my own son”.

The sculptor continues his work, day after day, rough corners are hewn off, discolouration's disappear, jagged surfaces are made smooth, and the block of granite begins to assume the shape and the image of his son.

But all the time, the sculptor does not see the unfinished granite, he sees the image of his son, as he looks right through the rough edges, and the weather scarred surface.

Jesus said, “have I not chosen you” and in these words we discover something mysterious, that God has chosen us from before the beginning of the world, and he has chosen us to be conformed into the image of his perfect Son Jesus.

The truth is we are already glorified in his eyes. The divine sculptor sees the finished product while he continues the work of making us more like Jesus; his spirit is gradually conforming us to the image of his son. This is the work that is being done within the circle of grace, it's a work of transformation; it's a work of preparation, for in the words of 1 John 3v2, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him just as he is”.

He has chosen you to be recipients of his grace, conformed to the image of his son, that is the work of the divine Sculptor, our gracious God.

Peter said, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life.

Peter, ever the spokesman for the disciples, makes a profession of faith, “to whom shall we go, and that's a good question. If Jesus doesn't satisfy your soul, then to whom shall you go?

Will you leave the circle and go back to the world? Will you turn your back on the one who has given you forgiveness and grace? Will you go away from the one who loves you with an eternal love? The one who has rescued from the power of the evil one. But where will you go?

The answer was simple for Peter, “you have the words of eternal life”. I believe there is a lot of meaning behind these words.

Greek philosophers in attempting to understand the relationship between God and the universe, spoke of an unknown mediator between God and the universe, naming this mediator, Logos.

The gospel writer John, tells us that this mediator unknown to them is our Lord and he is the Logos. That’s how the gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the word, the logos of God”.

Jesus is epitomised in John's gospel as the Logos of God, the Word of God, he is the total concept of God; he is the divinity speaking through the Son of God, not merely in parts of speech as in a sentence composed by words, but in the human life of a divine person.

John, in his gospel highlights that Jesus was in existence before things came into being, therefore he is uncreated and an eternal being and therefore God.

When Peter said you have the words of eternal life. This is surely pointing to the logos, the very one who has the power to give eternal life to those who would receive it.

John wrote, “the word was with God”. With means literally facing God, which gives this beautiful picture of Jesus literally facing God at creation. Therefore, the words is a person facing God the Father.

Peter in this declaration of faith, undoubtedly sees the link between Jesus and God. Jesus has the words of eternal life, because Jesus is the word of God, and that word has the ability to give life and life in all its fullness.

So, today the words of Jesus come to us also, “do you want to leave me too”?

I hope and pray that you see In Jesus, the one who has the words of eternal life. In John 3 v16, that great verse, “For God so loved the world, he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will never perish but have eternal life...the correct interpretation from the Greek, is that you will have life continuing, in other words, it has already begun, when you accept Jesus as your Saviour, he has already chosen you, and you are in his circle and he won't let you go.

So, in Jesus, we meet with a God who has faced up to the ultimate challenges of life, the devil, sin, pain and suffering and evil and who has

overcome them all on the cross, and so has opened for us a new way, a way of life continuing in his circle of grace.

Amen