

Sunday 28 May 2017 (Seventh Sunday of Easter)

St Andrew's, Cobham

Acts 1.6-14; 1 Peter 4.12-14, 5.6-11; John 17.1-11

The Mark of the Disciple

I'm sure each of us, somewhere along the line, has had the experience of being shaped by a mentor. For most of us, it's our parents, first and foremost. Then perhaps an excellent teacher, or someone in your work life, or at church.

I remember the man who taught me the ropes of being a solicitor. Gee, he was good, one of the brightest people I ever met, and he took me under his wing. He ruthlessly corrected everything I did, which meant I occasionally found myself crying in the loo and then blaming my puffy eyes on hay fever. He was tough on me, but he cared about me and saw my potential and wanted me to be the best I could.

There came a time when I had to move on and start doing things on my own. But he left his mark on me, and anyone who knew both him and me could look at my work and say, 'Ah, I see you worked for Peter.'

It's that relationship that we read about in our gospel reading this morning. Jesus has taught and moulded the disciples for three years, and now, as he faces his death, they must be ready to be in the world without him. He prepares them by praying for them, and his prayer is a beautiful summary of how they are marked by everything he has poured into them. Every follower of Jesus since then, including those sitting here today, bears those same marks. It is a precious description that helps us to understand how we are marked and what it means for our lives. William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, calls this the most sacred passage in all the gospels.

So what *did* Jesus' prayer say to us about the marks of being a disciple, a follower of Christ? Let's have a look.

1. The first and most important mark of a disciple is that they **realize and accept that in Jesus, we see God**. *Jesus said, 'Father, I have made your name known to them' [Jn 17.6]*. This doesn't mean that he told the disciples what to call God – rather, he shows in his person what God is like. There was once little girl at school and she was drawing a picture. The teacher asked her what she was drawing and she replied, 'I'm drawing God, miss.' 'But that's impossible,'

said the teacher, ‘no-one knows what God looks like.’ To which the little girl replied, ‘They will in a minute, miss.’ To the disciple, Jesus is the living, breathing picture of God.

2. The next mark of the disciple is **the knowledge that we were chosen by God**. *Jesus said, ‘[Father] they were yours, and you gave them to me.’ [Jn 17.6]*. This may be difficult to understand, but the fact is that even before we were called to be disciples of Jesus, there was something in us that belonged to God, so that when we heard Jesus’ call, we were able to hear it and answer it. I’m not saying that we had no choice in the matter. It’s like the good teacher who instils something of themselves in the pupil and hopes they will use it, but understands that they are free to reject their potential. The disciple is marked by the sense of honour of being chosen, and also the responsibility that goes with it.
3. The next mark of the disciple is **the gift of eternal life**. *Jesus said, ‘[Father], you have given [the Son] authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.’ [Jn 17.2]*. Because we accept Jesus and trust in him, we have received the same sort of life that is in God – what we call eternal life – life that doesn’t disappear when we die but continues beyond death. The mark of the disciple is that they know that everything they do here and now is significant because it contributes to God’s eternal kingdom, and we will be a part of that eternal kingdom.
4. Another mark of the disciple is **obedience**. *Jesus said, ‘They have kept your word.’ [Jn 17.6]*. There’s no merit in hearing the commands of God and simply accepting that they are true. If we don’t *obey* those commands or at least try our best, we can’t claim to be followers of Jesus. We’re just getting in the way.
5. The next mark of a disciple we learn from Jesus’ words, *‘They know that everything you have given me is from you.’ [Jn 17.7]*. What is it that God gave Jesus? Well, God gave Jesus a job, a mission. He was sent to establish God’s kingdom on earth, and he had the divine authority to do it.

There are two things we must take away from this:

- a. Firstly, as followers of Jesus, we share in his work. Just as his mission was to establish God’s kingdom on earth, so we bear **the mark of responsibility to carry on that work**. We have a job to do, and the true disciple is one who rolls up their sleeves and gets on with it.

- b. Secondly, we are **marked by sharing in Jesus' authority**. I think we often forget this. God has given us a job to do *and* the authority to do it. So often we are hesitant or shy about our Christianity, perhaps even apologetic. We lack *confidence* in our calling. The mark of the disciple is someone who takes their faith very seriously.

6. The next mark of the disciple is just lovely.

- a. First of all, **we bring glory to Jesus**. Jesus said, *'I have been glorified in them.'* [Jn 17.10].
- b. Second, **we are cherished**. Jesus prayed, *'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me'* [Jn 17.11]. He asks God to protect us from evil because we are precious to him.

Now, when we think of all our failures and sins, this may seem hard to believe, but it is true, because Jesus said it. We bring glory to Jesus. And not only that, we are precious to him. Imagine that! If you ever doubt your self-worth, just remember these words. There is no place for self-hatred in the life of the disciple. The mark of the disciple is the peace that comes from self-acceptance.

7. And now we come to the final part of Jesus' prayer. Jesus said, *'Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one.'* [Jn 17.11]. We learn from this prayer what our goal and destiny is. The mark of the disciple is that **they know where they are going**, and it is to be freely united in complete love for one another and for God, just as Jesus and the Father are united. Sadly, we fail in this as individuals and as a church, over and over again. But praise God, through the love of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, we know that in the end we will triumph.

My friends, that was a lot to take in but I pray that as we understand more clearly how Jesus sees us, we will go out into the world and show the marks of being a disciple ever more clearly, so that when people meet us they will say, 'You must have worked for Jesus'. May God bless us all.

Amen.