

St James

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on the feast of St James the Apostle, Sunday 25 July 2021

Readings: Acts 11 v 27 – 12 v 2 and Matthew 2 vv 20-28

The life of the early church was far from perfect, as today's gospel reading demonstrates. The disciples get it wrong. They have quickly forgotten the teaching of the sermon on the mount and now want positions of privilege and power.

Matthew repeats Mark's story about James and John wanting the best seats in the kingdom; but there is one important difference. Rather than having James and John making such a request (which may reflect badly on church leaders, a significant consideration for Matthew, who is the most 'church focussed' of the gospel writers), Matthew records their mother asked the favour. In both accounts, the other disciples are annoyed - most likely, perhaps, because they also would like positions of privilege, and don't like the idea of James and John 'pulling a fast one'. However for Jesus it is the issue, and not the personality, that matters here. His teaching is the same in both accounts. His disciples are not to go about lording it over others, but to be servants of all. The pattern for those in the kingdom is to follow Jesus who came not to be served but to serve.

Professor Richard Burridge, a former Dean of King's College London, is a noted specialist in interpretation of the Bible. He writes,

'In Matthew's gospel disciples have a little faith. They understand, believe and worship Jesus, but they have to become learners and grow in their little faith so that they can teach others.

Disciples are part of a community with a mission and discipline. The relationship of the disciples with each other in community is a key characteristic of discipleship in Matthew - alongside their relationship with God, and Jesus.'

The reading from Acts shows that the first disciples have understood this teaching as the Christian community grows and matures in the years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples determined to send relief to believers in Judea. They were becoming a distinctive community; they were being noticed, and they were persecuted for it. James was killed on Herod's orders.

But in spite of the external threats, these Christians are looking outwards to their brothers and sisters in need, and they are responding to that need.

In short, the disciples

- Listened to their context: people were going to be in need because of a famine,
- Had a vision of how they could help: the disciples assessed how they could respond, and
- Acted on their vision: each, according to their ability, sent aid to those in need.

And this is very much the same process as that with which we need to engage.

The mission of the church has always depended on both the work of lay people as well as that of the clergy. After all, the clergy are a tiny minority of the whole people of God.

The planting and development of new congregations has always been a key part of the strategy of mission for the church. Think of the building of the additional churches in St Peter Port in the nineteenth century. St Barnabas and St James are no longer churches, but St John and St Stephen and Holy Trinity continue to flourish. Recently, a new initiative based at St John's church, called Ignite, has worked creatively with people who have not

previously found it easy to engage with our churches. There are new initiatives in a number of other churches in Guernsey, from Messy Church to Taizé services, and much between.

Recently, a potentially good national Church of England initiative, established with the intention of encouraging the planting and development of new congregations, almost failed at stage one by some poorly thought-out wording.

In a rather unfortunate way, this new initiative, called Myriad, rather over egged the pudding. It suggested that clergy and church buildings were 'key limiting factors' to church growth. There has been much apology for the poor wording, and restatement of the importance of parish and of the complementary role of clergy and lay people.

But the task of reimagining and reinventing our parish-based mission and ministry in our generation is hugely important. It is one of the factors that led to a review of the Deanery of Guernsey, currently under way.

And key to that is both the discernment of vocations to the ordained ministry and encouragement for developing the discipleship of each one of us, lay and ordained.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus says, 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Following Jesus means service and discipleship – and working that out, each of us, in ways that are appropriate both to our circumstances and gifts, and to the context in which we find ourselves.

God invites us to do three things:

- To listen to our context;
- To hear where and how God is calling us to respond; and
- To do what we can, according to our ability.

You may not be surprised that these three priorities are those which If you would like to explore what this means, I would love to offer some opportunities for conversations about it during the autumn, so that we can reflect and learn together about how we can explore that call to servant discipleship in this parish – so that we can become intentional about our discipleship and our belief that God is calling us to grow in three ways - service, spirituality and numbers.

In many places, exploring discipleship has been found to be a key part of the strategy to renew our churches. It aims to involve the whole church congregation in assessing where the local church is at, where it discerns God is calling, and in identifying specific, achievable tasks focussed towards that vision. It is, if you like, moving our mission action planning a stage further and exploring what it means to us and for us as individual Christians.

'I planted the seed,' writes St Paul to the church at Corinth, 'Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.'

May we so work here in the parish of St Andrew and across Guernsey that we may see God graciously blessing our discipleship with a Church where growth, in every sense, is a reality.