

Sermon on Good Shepherd Sunday, April 30, 2023

I've been watching *The Chosen* lately. We finally bought a smart TV about a year ago, after having no TV for most of our adult lives. And I'm finally figuring out how to use it. Pathetic, eh? But you know how I love technology. But I'm starting to learn the joys of watching what I want, when I want. Last time I had a TV you had to watch what was on the 3 or 4 channels, when it was on or you missed it. This is better.

Someone I trust recommended *The Chosen* and I started watching it. It's about Jesus and is a dramatization of the gospels. I'm usually not keen on these because I usually think they get Jesus totally wrong. But I think *The Chosen* gets him right. He is a very warm, caring person, but also a strong leader and has a clear vision of what he's doing and he's not afraid of people. He's not afraid of the people in authority and he's not afraid of sinners and outcasts. He treats everyone like human beings he loves. And so does the series. We start to feel sympathetic to the Romans and the Pharisees and Sadducees and everyone.

Of course, the gospels only give a bare outline of the stories, so this series has to fill in some details, people's back stories, and so on. They use legend a bit and imagination a bit to fill in the bits not in the Bible. For example, we all know Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John, the Galilean fishermen, early on. And in the series we're introduced to Matthew at this point, the tax collector who is trying to collect their arrears in taxes. Pretty much everyone was always in arrears on their taxes in those days because it was a really unfair system. We don't know that Matthew was their tax collector, but he could have been. So the four of them dislike Matthew and he finds them difficult.

And then Jesus calls him and he starts following Jesus. You can imagine how they all feel about this and when Jesus isn't around there's a fair bit of subtle and not so subtle picking on Matthew. And Mary Magdalene, and a couple of the others. At one point one of the disciples takes Jesus aside and asks him what he thinks he's doing, calling such low life as Matthew to be one of his students. Jesus looks at him and says, "I have called every single one of you because you have something I need for this ministry. All of you have something important to offer. And all of you have areas where you need to grow."

As the series goes on – and I'm almost finished the third season and they haven't made the next season yet and I really hope they get on with it. As the season goes on, the disciples are jostled together as they trail after Jesus around the Holy Land, listen to his sermons, eat dinner with him, talk, do the jobs he gives them. And over time they learn to understand each other better and respect each other more. And you see each one of them growing in various ways. Jesus is slowly but surely forming them and drawing out their good side and helping them deal with their less good side.

Well, I was thinking about this when I was reflecting on the reading from Acts today. This reading takes place on the feast of Pentecost. There are about 120 believers who are gathering together, praying and waiting for the promised Holy Spirit, behind locked doors in Jerusalem. Suddenly, the Spirit comes upon them with power and they spill out onto the

streets and start preaching about Jesus and 3000 people are added to their number that day and baptised.

Can you imagine how hard it would be to integrate 3000 new people into their group? Their group that had spent 3 years working out how to operate together? During Jesus' lifetime, they'd kept a common purse as they travelled around, shared food, shared expenses, shared resources, shared hardships. It seems they had continued that, but now 3000 more people are added. It would have been disruptive, to say the least.

But today's passage shows that at least at the beginning they maintained their way of doing things, sharing everything they had with one another, looking after each other, worshipping together, listening to the apostles' teaching, eating together, doing signs and wonders, praying, getting to know each other, enjoying each other's company, and preaching the good news the way Jesus had taught them. And our passage today ends by saying, "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." The Lord added them.

Human beings have a tendency to think in "us" and "them" terms. We tend to group together with people who are like us and view people who are different with suspicion. They may eat different food or speak a different language or wear different clothes, and it seems odd to us and sometimes it makes us a bit nervous because we don't understand the rules of how to interact, and so we avoid them if we can. Sometimes it's just force of habit that we tend to hang out with people we know and feel comfortable with and not notice the others. But Jesus doesn't let us get away with this in the church. He throws us all in together and then helps us get to know each other and truly see each other as fellow disciples and helps us start to love each other.

We used to run a teen camp down at St. Anne's Camp. One year an older teen came with her friend. They were both kind of princessy types, making sure their make-up was perfect each morning. At camp. They didn't start out associating with the others. But we had no cell phone service so they had no choice. At the end, we went around and asked for one learning. She said, "These are not people I would usually associate with at all. But being here this week, I've discovered we have a lot in common. Good to learn this." Yeah.

What Jesus tells his disciples in The Chosen, that he has called each person for a reason, because each one has something important and necessary to offer and each person has areas in which they need to grow, is just as true today as it was then. Our church is growing at the moment. Almost every week someone new comes to church. I don't think a single one of those people was invited by any of us. Certainly not by me. I didn't know any of them. It is God the Holy Spirit who drew each of these people to our church at this time. To God's church at this time. As she drew us whenever we came.

Our job, all of our jobs, new people and old timers, is to get to know each other. To start to know what each person has to offer us, what we have to offer them. How they might be being called to grow at this time. How they might be being called to help us grow at this time. To pray together for some clarity about what God is calling us to together. This takes persistent work. I think of the disciples in the movie, jostled together as they walk the

length and breadth of the Holy Land, learning to know each other, learning to work together. Learning to love Jesus more and trust him.

We tend to think it would be nice to have new people in church because then they can take over the jobs we no longer want to do, and do them our way. But the newcomers might well have been called with different things in mind. They might have projects of their own to contribute. They might introduce new ideas, like Treena introducing the Taizé service tonight. It would be tempting to say, "We've never done that before," and view it with deep suspicion. On the other hand, we might view it as a new movement of the Holy Spirit to broaden our appeal a bit. Welcoming people means also welcoming their ideas, giving them free rein to try things, rejoicing when they succeed, helping pick them up when they fail, but working together for our common mission, to spread the good news of God's love for us.

So this is our job right now. God the Holy Spirit has been pleased to call a whole lot of new people to join us at this time. I don't think she's finished yet. God has a reason for this. I don't know what it is, but it's up to all of us to find out, by truly welcoming each other. That doesn't just mean saying hello when people first come. It means truly spending time together, getting to know each other, welcoming them into our midst, into our groups, into our social life. And not just with a view to how we can help them, or how they can fit into our plans and programs, but with a view to figuring out what God is up to and what God is offering us through them. Which might not be what we had in mind.

Jesus doesn't always put us together with the people we would choose if left to our own devices. Like putting Matthew and the fishermen together. Or us and people we might not think we have anything in common with. Or people we might feel nervous around because they're different. And Jesus does this for a reason. Sometimes he does it to help us overcome our prejudices, which we all have. Sometimes he does it so we can start to see each other as fellow seekers, struggling to do the right thing in life and making mistakes, like us. Just like us.

Usually, at the very least, Jesus calls us together so we can all grow from the experience and work together on his projects. And it's not just within our church that we are starting to think outside the box a little. Our region is starting to explore more ways we can work together. Our Ministerial is exploring more ways the different Spryfield churches can work together. We've suddenly realised God has placed us together in this area for a reason and doesn't want us to be isolated from each other, but for all of us to be partners with him in the work he is calling us to do.

Like the disciples in The Chosen, our first job is to follow Jesus together, without perhaps understanding much of what he's up to, and get to know each other, learn to work together, learn to love each other. Because the one thing we do have in common, besides being very fallible human beings, is our love for Jesus. That binds us together. Sometimes it's the only thing we have in common. But it's enough.

That's what the Christian life is about, my friends. Following Jesus like the early disciples and trusting that he knows what he's doing, even if we have no idea. Working

together with the people he's put us with to spread the Kingdom of God here in this place.
May the Holy Spirit continue to guide us and form us as we follow Jesus together.