

*actually St. Aidan's West Epping, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020*

**“DISCIPLESHIP: KEEP GOING AND KEEP GROWING”**

**(Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 2 Peter 1:1-11; Luke 5:1-11)**

One of the problems with the big mass evangelistic rallies that used to be popular some decades ago was that many people went forward to make a decision for Christ, but that seemed to be the end of it. Many made a response more or less in the heat of the moment, or because family or friends were going forward, or perhaps because they were caught up in the emotion of the occasion. But very soon, it was as if nothing had actually happened.

One of the big strengths of Billy Graham was that his organization was strong on the importance of helpful follow-up for those who made a response to his evangelistic message. So in association with his visits to Sydney, there was a strong program afterwards to help people to understand the implications of the Gospel message to which they had responded, and to connect them with a church which would encourage and help them to **keep going** and to **keep growing** in their new faith in Christ.

We have heard before the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel: “Go and make **disciples** of all nations”. He doesn't say to make **converts**. He doesn't say to get people to “make a decision”, as those evangelists often used to put it. He said to **make disciples**: and first and foremost a disciple is a learner, someone who seeks to **grow** in their understanding.

Jesus said these people should **be baptized**, expressing their entry into a new faith, with a new Lord, a new allegiance, and a new community to belong to. And he said that they should **be taught what Jesus wants them to do**: they must learn how to live as a follower of Jesus. So it is in today's Gospel that Jesus tells Simon Peter that he will soon be a “fisher of men”, as the old version put it. In other words, he will be gathering people into the community of Christ, into the kingdom of God. This would not be a decision that was easy-come, easy-go: rather this would be true repentance, a real change of direction, so that these people would truly become ongoing followers of Christ, trusting him as their Saviour and following him as their Leader through life.

This same Peter wrote two letters in the New Testament, and in the opening section of his Second Letter which we read this morning, Peter is writing to people who need to be encouraged and indeed challenged to **keep going and keep growing**.

Peter recognizes that as we follow Christ, there are always two sides. On one side he describes our Christian faith as a precious **gift of God**. Our faith isn't something we worked up all by ourselves: **God** was at work too, enabling us to overcome that human resistance, so that we **would** trust in Christ, and open up to the forgiveness and the salvation that he offers.

But there is another side to this. God through his Spirit is at work on our behalf: but his work doesn't reduce **our own responsibility to truly respond**. Indeed, if we realize that God is at work **in** us and **for** us, that should be a great encouragement to us to keep going and to keep growing. **We are not on our own** in the challenges of following Christ. In fact, says Peter, “Christ's divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness”. Following Christ may sometimes be difficult, but God will ensure that it is not too hard for us when it comes to the crunch.

Peter says that God's desire is that we **escape from the corruption** that is in the world because of lust. What is he getting at?

Lust is not just something to do with sex. It is the human desire for pleasure, for power, for possessions. It is human greed and self-centredness. Ultimately we shall escape from it in God's kingdom where our adoration of our Lord and our love for our fellow members of the kingdom will bring us perfect satisfaction, and make that sort of lust quite irrelevant. But the challenge here and now is to keep it at a distance in our daily lives, to **flee** from it in our daily lives: to be people who love and serve and reach out, rather than people who are caught up in our own wants and desires.

And then Peter says something rather strange: he talks about us becoming “**participants in the divine nature**”. I don't think he is saying that ultimately we somehow get literally caught up into the very being of God, that we become part of God. We are human beings, not God. We are a unique part of God's creation, not part of God himself. But we **are** made in his image, and in his kingdom we will **reflect** God's reality and his character in a new way. The barriers will be down between us and God. And of course, God is within us **even now**, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God at work in us.

God's promises and his purposes for us are wonderful, beyond our understanding. And therefore we need to be looking forward to them and in a sense to be **preparing for them**.

How do we do that? Peter tells us the way to **keep going and to keep growing**. You probably noticed that list of qualities he says that we are to develop, to keep working at.

**Faith:** a real trust in Christ that opens us up to his forgiveness and his wonderful promises. The foundation for living a Christian life.

**Goodness:** seeking to live in a way that is consistent with Christ's teaching, and to show his character in the things we say and do.

**Knowledge:** Two thousand years later, we have the benefit of being able to read, and having the scriptures and large numbers of resources easily accessible. So how often do we read a book designed to help us grow in our Christian understanding, and in our knowledge of God and the scriptures? And at a personal level, do we spend a regular time of reflection on the scriptures and prayer – perhaps some time each day - to help us grow in our relationship with God. However mature we might be, we need to grow in our knowledge **about** God, but also our **personal knowledge** of God.

**Self-control:** How good are we at saying “No” when it is best to say no? How well do we have our tongue under control?

**Endurance:** Do we hang in there when it would be easy to give up, to say what we feel like because we are irritated or hurt? Do we give up on people, when they really need our patient guidance or support?

**Godliness:** That active desire to please God in all that we do, even when we mightn't feel like it.

**Mutual affection:** That warmth and kindness which needs to be displayed in every church; that **real care for each other** because we are members of Christ's family, and we matter to each other.

And as the climax of this list, Peter puts **love:** that readiness to do what we can for our neighbour, whoever he or she may be, whatever she or he may be like. As the Good Samaritan reminds us, love is not just a feeling: it is a willingness to graciously serve the other person, whoever they may be, even if it is inconvenient, even if we don't feel like it.

This collection of qualities is almost like a shopping list. These are the things we need to keep developing in our lives: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love itself.

The more we exercise these, the more we will be reflecting the character of God in our lives. The less we exercise them, the less we will enable people to feel that the Gospel of Christ has something worthwhile to say to them.

As Peter says, God wants us to be effective and fruitful in his service. Not only Peter, but Jesus and Paul also talk about the importance of **bearing fruit** in our lives. What fruit are they talking about? Paul talks about the **fruit of the Spirit:** genuine Christian character, which others can see. There is also the fruit of **good works**, as we serve one another and other people in Christ's name. And there is fruit which is the result of our **faithful witness**, when a church is reaching out and growing, so that people hear from us the message that Jesus came **for them**, and that the Gospel is **for them**.

So Peter encourages his readers, and that means **Peter encourages us**, to seek to grow and develop in these various aspects of our Christian life and our Christian character. Jesus brings us cleansing of our past sins: let's not lapse back into the patterns of sins that are already forgiven and dealt with. Instead, says Peter, let us be eager to confirm our call and election as God's children: let us **keep going** in faith, and let's **keep growing** in our understanding and maturity. If we do that, we will never stumble so as to fall over on our spiritual journey. Yes, we will still trip ourselves up at times: we are not yet perfect. But our goal is God's perfect and glorious kingdom.

So let's **keep going** along the path of discipleship: remembering all that God has done for us in Christ, and thankful that God is at work in us as he continues to help us to follow Jesus along the path of life. And let us also be ready to reach out to those around us in the ways that we can, with the love of God, and as we have opportunity, to reach out to people with the message of the Gospel, letting others know about the love of God and his invitation to share in his eternal blessings.

In faith and love and faithful witness, let us **keep on keeping going and keeping growing**. Amen.

*Paul Weaver*