

## 14<sup>th</sup> June 2020 6pm Journeying Together as Disciples

### **Copy of readings and transcript of talk**

Service led by Emma Latham, talk by Rob Latham

Bible readings by Matt Hesling Gibson and Emma Latham.

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### **Epistle: Romans 5:1-8 [NLT]**

[Matt Hesling Gibson:]

The reading is taken from Romans chapter 5, verses 1 to 8.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. <sup>2</sup> Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory.

<sup>3</sup> We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. <sup>4</sup> And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. <sup>5</sup> And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

<sup>6</sup> When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. <sup>7</sup> Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. <sup>8</sup> But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

Thanks be to God.

### **Gospel: Matthew 9:35-10:23 [NRSV]**

[Emma Latham:]

Our second reading is taken from Matthew chapter 9 beginning at verse 35.

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. <sup>2</sup> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

<sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>8</sup> Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. <sup>9</sup> Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, <sup>10</sup> no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. <sup>11</sup> Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. <sup>12</sup> As you enter the house, greet it. <sup>13</sup> If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. <sup>14</sup> If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. <sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

<sup>16</sup> “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup> Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; <sup>18</sup> and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup> When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; <sup>20</sup> for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. <sup>21</sup> Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; <sup>22</sup> and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>23</sup> When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

This is the word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

## ***Talk***

[Robert Latham:]

Good evening everybody and thank you to Emma.

Shall we pray.

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Last August I was invited to preach at the Rothley Methodist Church in Leicestershire. This is our family church, and it has great memories for me. I was baptised there, though I was only four weeks old, so I don't remember that. But I went to Sunday school there, I was made a member there, and so many other things that have happened there since. It was from that church that I was invited to become a Methodist local preacher. And I was reminded when visiting the church that actually it was 50 years ago that I began that process. Indeed, it will be 50 years next March since I preached my first sermon. I'll have to think about how I might celebrate that – I'll let you join in!

To train as a Methodist local preacher, in those days, you first of all accompanied other local preachers and helped them in taking the services at which they would preach. You had to be given a formal note from the superintendent minister in order to enter the pulpit, not that I ever saw it, by the way, and then you lead the prayers and announce the hymns and gradually be

carefully allowed to do more and more, to the point where you were allowed to preach. I had two senior Methodist local preachers who were appointed as mentors to me. And they encouraged me greatly with their wisdom and advice. I think I'll always be grateful for the wise counsel of experienced preachers. When I was learning the craft it was good to have their insights and knowledge, so that I could be better prepared for the task in hand.

One simple piece of advice was simply that I should make sure that I preached on both of the readings that were read in the service. That might sound very trivial, but sometimes that's not always that easy. When you choose the readings yourself, you make sure that they fit together. But sometimes our lectionary doesn't always do that. And I have to confess that when looking at the readings for tonight, then I wasn't really quite sure exactly how they did fit together. In the Gospel we meet such a familiar Jesus, one who is well aware of the needs of the people around him. He sees them as sheep without a shepherd, and he knows that they need to hear the Good News that he has to bring. He tells the disciples that it's a bit like harvest-time. The harvest is full and ready but there are so few people to go and gather the harvest in. And so he decides to gather the disciples together and send them out to the places where he's going to visit. He tells them to go only to the Israelites, they're not to go to Gentiles, they're not to go to the Samaritans, but they are to go ahead of him, and they're going to have a ministry of casting out demons and bringing healing to those who are sick. It's very much as we would expect to see - the call of people to be invited into relationship with Jesus, and to allow the power of the Good News to bring people closer to God,

The Epistle is a different matter. It's about serious discipleship. The passage begins by reminding us that we are established in Jesus Christ by our faith. Through it, we're able to access the privileges that he gives to us, and we can look forward to the glory of God in the heavenly realms. Then we move on to a rather more difficult bit, because it talks about endurance and building up character. Let me read from that part:

<sup>3</sup> We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. <sup>4</sup> And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. <sup>5</sup> And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

And just to make matters much more complicated, Paul then reminds us of the great love of God: it wasn't because of any special privilege, any right of being born in a particular way, any wealth or riches that endears God to us. In fact, the love of God is so marvellous and wonderful, that it was when we were *sinners* that Christ died for us. Paul points out that we might consider dying for somebody who we think is very good, very, very good, but very rarely would we consider laying our lives down for somebody who we thought was just rotten with sin. And that's how we were when God gave us his Son Jesus to die on the Cross.

So I think the problem I had about the two passages, was simply that you're thinking about gathering in people who, to that moment, knew nothing about the kingdom of God, or about Jesus, and that they are very new in the faith, how can they cope with being told that endurance and difficulties and problems are necessary in order to build up your faith, and trust in God? It's something that I have been familiar with over the years, because I've often used the 'Saints Alive' course. In that course there is an opportunity for people to be prayed for, so that they will have an experience of God and be filled with the Holy Spirit. The following week is a time when we not only reflect on what might have happened to them when they were prayed for, but also to reflect on the difficulties, dangers, misunderstandings, and even doubts that they will have, and how to use them to build up their faith. So I recall some teaching in South

Africa when we were encouraged to think how adversities and difficulties in our faith could actually help us grow and develop and overcome these things. It's a simple illustration. Here's the problem, we overcome it in the power of the Spirit, and trusting in God. Another problem comes against us, and we overcome that, in the power and the goodness of God. Another problem comes against us, and we overcome it, in the power and goodness of God, and see how our faith is being built up in that process. You could say, trials and temptations bring endurance, endurance brings confidence in the Gospel, confidence in the Gospel leads us to trusting more deeply in that hope of salvation. And so it goes on. It's all about battling through, not in your own strength, but in the power and the love of God, particularly as the Holy Spirit gives us help to do these things. And this is very important.

While I was preparing for this sermon, I tuned into YouTube, and had a listen to a short clip, featuring Ravi Zacharia, the Indian-Canadian-American apologist who's just recently died. He was asking a colleague of his, why it was that so many young Christians seem to fall away so quickly. His colleague responded by saying this: "If you take a newborn baby and throw them in the desert, then they will die." The implication is that young Christians are being thrown into places where there is very little support for them, and where their abilities to withstand the temptations, difficulties, doubts and all the other things that are thrown at us these days. It's just, they don't have the resources to do that. And consequently, their faith fails and dies because it's strangled and comes to an end.

So how do we bring these two thoughts together? Well, it seems to me the problem arises when we don't connect the two forms of discipleship that we've talked about. When we focus first of all on just those who are being invited into the Kingdom, and then talk about how mature Christians develop their faith and remain disciples, then we are obviously talking about two slightly different things. But yet they clearly are closely connected. Because the aim of making disciples is not to leave them as children, but encourage them by the power of the Holy Spirit to mature and to grow and to stand on their own two feet, not in the sense of being independent of God but perhaps rather more the opposite: to be dependent and know for themselves how they can access the Holy Spirit, and be guided through life in the way that all disciples are.

If we reflect again on the Gospel reading, we see some very interesting features which we've not touched upon. We notice that the disciples, that is the twelve, are in a kind of second phase of their learning. Up to now, they have sat at the feet of Jesus, they've heard his teaching, they've watched him do things. But now he's equipping them to go out and do themselves the things that you would expect Jesus to do.

So already, we're talking about a second phase for those who are closest to Jesus. Of course those who know the Gospels well will understand that there's a long journey yet, before the disciples are going to be finally trusted to become apostles, and to go out into all the world. I suppose, my question comes down to this: how do you encourage those who are coming into the faith to start that journey of life, that pilgrimage of faith in which they develop from being new believers into having mature and developed faith in which they too will be able to call others into the kingdom?

It's often said one of the biggest turns-off from the Christian faith is the behaviour of us Christians. This is not a comforting thought. The disciples were told by Jesus that the world will believe because of the way they love one another. In the early Church the cry was often, "Look how these Christians love one another!"

What does this say about discipleship? The [Greek] word for 'disciple' in the New Testament literally means 'a learner'. Every Christian is a disciple. We

never stop learning until the day we go to meet our Maker. We remain disciples because it's important that we continue to develop as a Christian. In the letter to the Romans in chapter 8, we're told the ultimate goal of the disciple is to be conformed to the image of the Son, and we won't be that until we see him face to face. So it's our task to journey together as disciples who are not only learning from Jesus, but are being encouraged by each other. It means therefore that discipleship is about maturing as a person, whatever stage of the journey we're on, whether we are just beginning, like those who are being called by the disciples to come and know Jesus; whether we're like the disciples in the Gospel being sent out to learn more about what discipleship means; or whether we are the sort of people that Paul is referring to, who need to build up our faith, and our understanding of discipleship, through the tests and trials that will inevitably come the way of any Christian. We do it, though, together. It's part, I guess, of being the body of Christ, people who are seeking to work out the will of God, together in this world, so that together we are prepared to be with Jesus in the next.

So let's think for a moment, as we come to an end, about those who have helped us in our journey of discipleship, people who have taught the faith to us, people who travel with us; those from Church who we aren't able to see at the moment, but still think about a lot; people we are in touch with in the variety of ways that we've been using over this lockdown period. Whoever they are, what is it about them that's been so important? Surely, one of the important things is the character in which they have lived out what they know of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's their personal witness as much as the things that they've said to us that has impacted on us, as much as anything else. The unexpected kind deeds, the willingness to go the extra mile, the sense of life that you might see in them.

One of the first questions that was asked in the Bible was that of Cain to God, when He inquired about Abel, "Why should I know? Am I my brother's keeper?" There wasn't an answer to that question. But in our heart of hearts I think we know what the answer is. And the answer is 'yes'. Where we as disciples are concerned, we are meant to look out for each other, to help each other grow, to share the journey, and to be part of each other, to be willing to act in the way that Jesus Christ did, to be willing to see in those around us, the face of Jesus Christ and the things they do for us. In each step of the journey, no matter whether you are just beginning, maturing or getting near to being the full ticket, the important thing is that we remain as people who are constantly learning from our God, from our faith, and from each other. In this way, may those who are young in the faith be brought into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, and may we too know that our faith is deepened because others travel with us.

Amen.

[Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> with help from Hamish Blair]

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