

Sunday, November 3, 2019

Choices in Discipleship

“Be-a part of Christ’s Church” has been our theme this autumn season and today our Gospel reading encapsulates for us what the mission of Jesus was all about, and in turn what the mission of the church is as well. This is presented in contrast to the reading from the prophet Habakkuk who seems to just complain about everything and even complains to God about not being listened to at all! From these two readings we learn that in order to be a disciple of Christ we have choices to make; decisions to follow up on and actions to consider.

The people of Habakkuk’s time were facing difficult times with violence, destruction, strife and contention all around him. Those trying to keep the law are slack in their duties and justice never prevails. Those who are righteous seem to have no way out as the wicked surround them. Those in charge don’t seem to care about justice but only themselves and what they can gain.

Just think about these circumstances for a moment. Almost at any time when you hear the news of the world you could almost repeat Habakkuk’s words—violence, destruction, strife, justice may prevail but is slow, presence of wicked and sinful people. We are living in an era where drugs seem prevalent and the desire to live and be happy is confused with being high for a short time. We wonder about this world and whether anyone really is content at all. There seems to be work strikes happening all over the place for the sake of wage increases which eventually skew the whole picture of equity in the workplace. People will also complain that there is not enough affordable housing, good paying jobs and of course the number of homeless is increasing. And we hear complaining-and maybe sometimes people are asking, what can be done about it and specifically what can one person do?

Habakkuk complains to God, “How long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” and he lists all the things that are happening and wonders why God has not intervened. But God has been responding all along. God then answers Habakkuk and tells him to write the vision he receives down and to make it plain on tablets so that someone running may read it. The vision for the appointed time will come and will not be delayed. And those who are righteous will live by their faith. What Habakkuk’s writings tells us is simply: God meets us in our suffering.

Even though the world is often seen as the wicked surrounding the righteous—there is still good news. We who believe trust that God’s vision is coming. And even when there seems to be reason to complain- when there is no food in the barn or in the pastures or nothing produced on the trees or

vines—or with local problems of affordable housing, increased use of food banks and free suppers. Yet in all of these times, God still blesses people and calls them to serve Him. No matter what, those who truly love God share their love and show it not merely in the gifts of God. Yes, there will be low moments and these low moments are not signs that God has abandoned us, but this is when those who believe really trust God even more.

Maybe this is where you are right now—you've read the newspaper, heard the radio and tv talk about the latest strike action, situation for the less fortunate, or about the latest murder or fires and you wonder why this is going on. And how is it God is not responding? Habakkuk's response to this is that God is with us in the suffering, and yet he is also with those who have faith, believe they can make a difference and are willing to work diligently with others in order to let go of what was, and embrace the new which lies ahead. Are you choosing to embrace what is to come—and have faith doing so? It might mean going away from your comfort zone, it might mean doing things you never thought possible or it might even be going out on a limb like Zacchaeus. Doing something unconventional in order to change your life. And this something enabled him to be seen for who he was— a sinner.

Zacchaeus was vertically challenged because of his physical stature—he was short. He knew what it meant to have to turn from side to side in a movie theatre or show or synagogue service just to see what was going on. He knew that it was best to carry a step stool if he was going to give any speech. And he knew what it meant to not be able to see what or who he wanted to see because the people taller than he were obstacles in his way. But Zacchaeus had heard that Jesus, the teacher and healer was going to be passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus because people had talked about him and he wanted to meet him in person. Zacchaeus knew the small village and the main road which Jesus would have to take as he walked toward Jerusalem. He was determined to see Jesus and so he put his plan into action. Zacchaeus knew the people of the village and he had a terrible reputation as a wicked man, not a good guy to call a friend. He was employed as a chief tax collector and was rich because he cheated people out of their money and was seen as wicked, scoundrel of a man.

But there was something happening with Zacchaeus that day that he was determined to see Jesus. He ran ahead on the road where Jesus would pass by and to get to a higher spot to see, he climbed a sycamore tree and then positioned himself on a limb that didn't seem strong enough but it still held. Had Zacchaeus done the right thing by walking out on a branch that hung over the road? Soon the crowd walking with Jesus came close to the tree. Jesus looked up and says to Zacchaeus, "Hurry up;

come down- I'm going to your house today." Jesus knew who he was and when he spotted Zacchaeus Jesus' plan to go to Jerusalem right away was changed. What had Jesus done-inviting himself to the rich man's house knowing that Zacchaeus was not a righteous believer in Him and his ministry? What was Jesus planning? Sure it would have been easy for Jesus to say, Zacchaeus get out of the tree; I'm Jesus and I know that you cheat people. Do you believe me or will you top living this way?

But this didn't happen. Nor did Zacchaeus have time to run home, tell his servants and wife and children to clean up the house a little, that they were having company or that it was Jesus the Teacher. After reaching Jesus, Zacchaeus walked with Jesus to his home, and on the way there, he confessed to Jesus what he had done. At the doorway he stood there and said to Jesus, "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much." Jesus declared to Zacchaeus that he was forgiven of all sin and that salvation had come to this house. Zacchaeus, a Jewish man and son of Abraham, was forgiven and his life would be forever changed.

What occurred in Zacchaeus' home after was probably quite a sight! Mrs Zacchaeus, children and servants would be going through many possessions and giving them away. And Zacchaeus would have to go to the bank in order to repay the people who would line up for their money. The people who did not trust Zacchaeus before would now see before them a changed person- because he wanted Jesus to see him. Maybe in his heart he knew he couldn't go on cheating them of their hard earned money but was unsure of what to do. Jesus passing by enabled words and moments to be exchanged and he eventually declares his faith in God.

As we have been considering what it means to "Be a Part of Christ's Church" in these last weeks, we have focused on the words of the "Belong" song. The purpose of the church is also made clear—"till all God's people in our church unique find our purpose and calling in Christ." When we consider the state of our world today we often complain just like Habakkuk yet he has written that God will hear the cry of his people and respond. God has responded—he sent us Jesus to be the one by and through whom we are to follow. We are to see him in those who profess their faith and devote their lives of service, and we are to do like Zacchaeus—confess, repent and believe. Then, the change begins not only in our day to day existence, but in living life filled with hope, serving others in love and sharing the joy that knowing we have nothing to fear because we belong to Him. We are his through faith.

We don't have to climb trees to see Jesus as Zacchaeus did. We merely have to open our eyes to see Jesus in the lives of those whom we call our church family; open our ears to hear the Spirit guiding

our choices and decisions of how best to use the resources with which we have been blessed; and to open our mouth and say we are His through faith and that we will serve Him throughout our lives.

This is Jesus' mission- to seek and save the lost and the mission of the church is to make disciples of those who come to know Christ Jesus and belong to him.

Where are you in your faith? Putting yourself out on a limb like Zacchaeus in order that Jesus will see you and hear your confession of sins? Walking with the crowd to find out more about this Son of God? Or maybe you have professed your faith and are striving to live the life as part of this church family and finding our purpose as we live out our faith. These are the choices of discipleship; choices that we each make as we strive to live like Jesus Let us pray.

God we thank you that we are a part of this church family and that you call us to faithfully serve you. Help us to live and love you each day as we seek you, know you and are known by you as your servant. We ask these things in the name of Jesus our Saviour. Amen.