

A Sunday before Lent pm 26<sup>th</sup> February 2017<sup>1</sup>

Place: St Mary's

Theme: Discipleship and Faith

Matt 17.9-23

- ◆ Discipleship is our theme for Lent. This morning I introduced our Lent Book 'Being Disciples' by Rowan Williams. I have been thinking about what our vision should be for our life together as a Parish across the team and here at St Mary's. I think that it might be 'Making Disciples in Wimbledon'. This is something we need to discern together and we are going to have a parish away day on the 25<sup>th</sup> November at the Kairos Centre in Roehampton to agree our Vision and start looking at a Mission Action Plan for the whole team. In preparation for that we are going to be thinking about what discipleship means together as we travel around the team this Lent. We are going to use this book to help us think about it.
- ◆ This evening's New Testament reading is a continuation of the story of the transfiguration that we read the first half of this morning. This story has important things to say about discipleship and faith.
- ◆ One of the qualities of discipleship that Rowan Williams talks about in the first chapter of his book is following. Being a disciple means following Jesus where he leads us. This story makes the connection between following and

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faith and helps us to understand better what faith really is.

- ◆ The story begins with Peter, James and John following Jesus up to the top of the mountain. Were they the only ones who were invited, or where all the disciples asked to come? It is not clear at the beginning of the chapter. Matthew just tells us that Jesus took with him ‘Peter, James and John. Maybe it was these three because they were the first he called and the closest to him. But in that case where is Andrew? Matthew tells us that both Peter and Andrew were called by Jesus to ‘come and follow me.’
- ◆ This evening’s New Testament reading tells us about what was going on at the bottom of the mountain while Jesus was being transfigured at the top. As the story unfolds things become clearer.
- ◆ The other disciples have been ministering to the crowd while Jesus, Peter, James and John are up the mountain. Unfortunately, their ministry has not been very effective. They have tried to heal the epilepsy of a boy whose life is threatened by the condition, but he has not been healed. When Jesus returns from the mountain the father comes and begs him to try himself; where the disciples had failed. Jesus responds to the father’s request with very strong language; but who is he calling ‘a faithless and perverse generation’? Who is it

that he is going to have to put up with? Who is it He is exasperated with because he was been with them so long, to so little effect?

- ◆ He is speaking with the father when he says this; is it him? I don't think so, it is not the father's prayers that have been ineffective. Surely then, it is the crowd of onlookers and spectacle seekers? But I don't think so. They have not been with Jesus a long time. It is the disciples who did not follow him up the mountain that Jesus is speaking to so harshly. It is Andrew and the others.
- ◆ After the boy has been healed, the disciples who had not gone up the mountain ask why their prayers were ineffective. Jesus tells them it is because of their lack of faith. They are the perverse and faithless generation.
- ◆ The next saying about needing only faith the size of a mustard seed to move mountains has been much miss interpreted and this has led to some very silly ideas about the power of prayer; because it is so often quoted out of context. When we are thinking about what Jesus means by this we need to remember that he is saying it to the group of disciples that did not follow him up the mountain. This is the key to unlocking this saying. They did not even have enough faith to follow him up a mountain let alone move one. It is not the crowd or the father who lack faith, it is the disciples. Those who would not follow

him up the mountain don't even have faith the size of a mustard seed.

- ◆ This is both encouraging and challenging for us as disciples today. I am sure that all of us have felt from time to time that our faith is insufficient. It is encouraging to know that it was just the same for the first disciples; even when they were witnessing Jesus ministry first hand. Secondly while Jesus is exasperated with them he does not give up on them. He does not tell them to go away and that they cannot be his disciples anymore. He is angry, but that does not mean the end of his relationship with them. More than this when their faith fails he steps in and sorts out their mess and heals the epileptic child.
- ◆ It is also encouraging because it tells us something important about what faith is. Faith in this story has nothing to do with what we do or don't believe about who Jesus is. It has nothing to do with agreeing that certain ideas are facts. Neither the disciples who did follow Jesus up the mountain or those who did not believed that Jesus was the Son of God at that point in the story, even if they did think that he was the Messiah.
- ◆ The difference between the two groups of disciples is that Peter, James and John trust Jesus enough to follow him up the mountain even when they don't understand the purpose of the

trip. Their love for him and their trust in him means that they willingly follow him up a mountain. When they get there, they catch a glimpse of his Glory. It is as they see Jesus transfigures that they begin to understand more of who he is, not because they have been told, but because they have seen and heard. Their faith leads them to deeper understanding, not the other way around.

- ◆ The group who stay at the bottom of the mountain don't trust Jesus enough to go where he leads. They won't take the arduous journey up the mountain, instead they decide it is more worthwhile to stay at the bottom of the mountain and minister to the crowds. How wrong they were. How faithless they were. No wonder Jesus is angry with them. Not just because they did not follow him, but because they missed a very special moment with God.
- ◆ So what do we learn about being disciples from this story? Firstly, that ministering to others and wanting to do good is not enough. Before that comes following where Christ leads, being obedient to him. This is what it means to have faith. Rather than trusting in our own judgement we trust Christ to lead us where we need to go.
- ◆ From here, all the disciples will follow him together to Jerusalem and to the cross. What they will discover on Easter Day is that the faith that led them to the cross has also led them to

something even greater than moving a mountain. It will lead them to discover that Christ even has power to overcome death through the resurrection and that he is leading them to eternal life and home to the Father. This is what faith is, it is willingness to follow Christ, to put him first. When we do that we discover a power that not only transforms us, but transforms the whole world far more profoundly than shifting a few mountains around.

