

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 17th January 2021
Andy Banks speaking on Mark 3:7-19 'Jesus' Strategy for Kingdom Growth'

For those with children feel free to mute this talk and use the material Debs prepared instead. We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel as we fix our eyes on Jesus, and ask ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life today? Let's read from 3:7-19.

[Read 3:7-19]

7Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. 8When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. 9Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. 10For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. 11Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.' 12But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

13Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. 14He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach 15and to have authority to drive out demons. 16These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means 'sons of thunder'), 18Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot 19and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

[Pray]

Celebrity endorsement is an increasingly popular advertising strategy. In the past, that meant a celebrity talking about or posing next to a product in a formal advert. Nowadays, they might be paid simply to post a picture of themselves on social media wearing, or posing with, a particular product. That alone can be sufficient to increase sales.

And there are sections of the Christian Church who have tended to think in very similar ways – who pray particularly for *celebrity* conversions, or who latch on to the tiniest inkling that a celebrity might be sympathetic to the Christian faith, because they believe that celebrity Christians are the golden ticket to bring many to faith. Now, God can and does use the celebrity status of some Christians to attract people to him – Billy Graham, for instance, or Eric Liddell, or going further back, Charles Spurgeon. There is a place for mass evangelism and the draw of a celebrity speaker.

Indeed, Jesus himself was hugely popular, followed by crowds wherever he went – as the summary at the start of today's passage shows. Crowds flocked to him from right across the Roman province of Palestine, including areas that were not traditionally part of Israel, like Idumea (the Greek name for Edom), or Tyre or Sidon. They came simply because they had heard of what Jesus was doing, especially his miracles. And so many were pushing forward to touch him and be healed that he had to get into a boat to teach them, so as to keep from being overwhelmed! Generally, whenever the crowds flocked around him, Jesus took the time to teach them, even if, as here, that might not have been his original plan. Yet teaching the crowds was not Jesus' *core* strategy for growing God's kingdom.

Rather, the *core* of his strategy was what he went on to do in vv.13-19: choosing just twelve apostles to invest his time in particularly – that number, of course, deliberately mirroring the twelve tribes of Israel. That strategy may sound counter-intuitive. Why would you turn away from great crowds to focus on a *few* if you want your movement to grow? But there is great wisdom behind it, which we can tease out from the details of what he called the Twelve to.

Firstly, "He appointed twelve that they might *be with him*." This wasn't so that Jesus didn't get lonely. Rather, it was so that they might observe and learn about the Kingdom of God through a total immersion into Jesus' teachings and way of life. Hearing a few sermons here and there, like the crowds did, is simply not enough to grow the kind of radical

discipleship which the New Covenant in Christ demands – the kind of discipleship that would sustain the fledgeling Church even through the most intense persecutions. The new era that Jesus inaugurated was so radical that the disciples could only truly learn of the lifestyle it required by observing it in concrete reality in Jesus' life, 24/7, for the next three years.

It is this total immersion into Jesus' way of life and teaching that granted the apostles the authority to establish the doctrines and practices of God's New Covenant people, the Church, and to record them formally in the pages of the New Testament. They could be trusted to faithfully pass on Jesus' teaching (his words *and* their true meaning), because they had so thoroughly absorbed it as they heard, observed and experienced it in him. None of them were brilliant theologians. But they understood Jesus because they had spent so much time with him.

This strategy also meant that, from its inception, Christianity was a *community*-based faith. Christians supported one another in every way – spiritually, financially, emotionally and physically. But, more than that, by choosing *twelve* apostles, not *one*, Jesus ensured that the Church would benefit from the *collective* wisdom of a *plural* leadership. Nowhere in the New Testament will you find the concept of a person who leads a church alone. Leadership is *always* plural because there is only *one* head of the Church, Jesus Christ, and plural leadership helps protect *his* headship. It protects the Church against a leader being drawn away from following the true Gospel of Jesus Christ – as we see in Galatians 2, when Paul challenged Peter's hypocrisy in not eating with Gentile believers. It also protects the Church from erroneous attempts by those with an agenda other than Jesus' agenda to discredit a godly leader – as we see when Paul's gospel was formally endorsed by the Jerusalem Church leadership, to silence those who wished to challenge his open acceptance of Gentiles into the Church. This is why, as Pastor, I don't lead this church alone, but *share* that responsibility with the deacons, and with other leaders appointed to specific roles.

So, by calling the twelve apostles to be with him, Jesus called them to live in *community* together. A quick look at the group he chose shows that this in itself was pretty miraculous! Quite apart from Peter's ego, Thomas' hesitancy, and James' and John's selfish ambition and fury that earned them the nickname "Sons of Thunder," Jesus also saw fit to include in his team a Zealot (who were willing to take up arms to *expel* the Romans from Israel) and a tax collector (who was actively engaged in helping the Romans *maintain* their rule over the country)! To unify that lot is truly, and can only be, a work of God! They did, however, have *one* thing going for them: they had all demonstrated a deep commitment to following Jesus. And that is by far the most important qualification for which we must look in considering who to invest our time in. I believe that's why Jesus didn't choose his apostles immediately, but waited to learn what was in their hearts (though of course, he also chose Judas Iscariot, whose heart was never fully turned to him).

So, Jesus called the twelve to be *with him* – to thoroughly immerse themselves in his teaching and his way of life and to become a true community around whom the New Covenant people of God would be built. But he also called them "that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons." In other words, he called them, so that he might send them out in his authority to share the gospel of his Kingdom by word and by a demonstration of his power. This clearly and deliberately mirrors Jesus' own ministry. Either without the other would be an incomplete and substandard gospel. But together the preaching and demonstration of Jesus' rule over all powers, eloquently testified to the truth that he is both God and Messiah, both Lord and Saviour.

Jesus intensively invested in the Twelve, so that they in turn would invest in others, who would invest in others, and so on. So, the Kingdom would spread. In Acts and through the New Testament letters we see the apostles following exactly the same strategy. Yes, they preached to thousands, but they invested *time* in training elders for each church, so that *they* could be equipped to lead and train others faithfully in the same doctrines and way of life as Jesus had taught the apostles.

I saw this very effectively put into practice when I was in Kolkata in India. We travelled with an organisation called Big Life Ministries, which was founded in 2003, and started working in earnest around Kolkata in 2006. They are a discipleship training programme, teaching disciples to make disciples, who make disciples. In each new place they visit, they look for people of peace who are receptive to the Gospel. They preach the gospel to the whole village, but focus their time

afterwards on training leaders who can train others to train others. We went in 2010, by which time they had planted some 4,000 or so churches through this method. By the end of 2019, they had planted 30,000 churches across over 100 nations. This is the potential of investing in a few, who will in turn each invest in a few.

So, what can we learn from this? Firstly, we learn that, if we want to really be useful in God's Kingdom, we must invest far more of ourselves into our own discipleship than merely listening to a sermon once a week. We must consistently and sacrificially prioritise spending time with Jesus. And do so in the company of others, so we can encourage and sharpen one another. So, are you in a small community of Christians that helps you grow in your faith? If not, why not join one of our small groups running via Zoom? Small groups enable the sort of community learning and growth that is simply not possible in a whole church setting – especially when we can't even meet together in person. So, why not be proactive during this lockdown in getting into the good habit of meeting together with other Christians to grow your own faith?

Then, I want to challenge you further. Who are you investing *in*, so as to make disciples who make disciples? We have different roles in this. Some of us could invest in others as a small group leader ourselves, helping Christians grow in their faith. For some of us, our group to invest in will be the children or youth of the church. Others may be better suited to reaching people who are *not* yet Christians. One of the things I would really like us to do this year is to run the Alpha Course on Zoom. Could you be a leader or a helper of a group of about six inquirers, to enable them to encounter Jesus for themselves?

What difference could we make for God's Kingdom in Bexleyheath and beyond if we each chose to *join* a small community of disciples who can help us to grow, and if we each prayerfully sought a small group of people whom *we* could disciple to become disciplers of others? Let's not only fix our eyes on Jesus, but follow his example together. Amen?

[Pray]