

Last Wednesday at homegroup we thought about our possessions -what would we keep, what would we give away. It made me think about my collection of old LP's including an original of the sound of music – I see a new version including 40 songs not previously heard is just about to be released!

One song from the sound of music is 'do a dear...' – which includes the line 'me, a name I call myself'.

What do we call ourselves in terms of our relationship with God – when taking collective worship at Downe, which is a non-church school the protocol is to say 'Christians believe' e.g in praying. Christians – or disciples?

It's a good question to ask, and it's where John Stott begins – today we start a sermon series based on Stott's final book released just before his death 10 years ago – radical discipleship (not too late to get a copy, and come along to homegroup on Wednesday evenings to ask questions on your mind after Sunday sermons.)

As we start, you might find it useful to have a bible in your hand – to check out the passages I'll be looking at – feel free to question and discuss – first let's pray.

Christian or Disciple - the answer to the question is there in the title.

Why not simply Christian?

The bible only uses the word 'Christian' three times – acts 11:26 – Luke records that 'it was in Syrian Antioch that Jesus disciples were first of all called Christians' – why there – Antioch was an international community – a multi-ethnic mix, if I'm still allowed to use the term – so the designation Christian was a sign that despite their cultural and ethnic differences, what united them was a common belief and trust in Jesus -this was more important than (in Paul's words being Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female). By the end of the book of acts, the term was clearly being used more widely – acts 26:28 when Paul appears in front of the roman ruler Agrippa, Agrippa remains unconvinced – do you think that in a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian'? And when Peter refers to the dispersed communities of believers following persecution around the roman world (1 peter 4:16) he refers to those who suffer for being Christian.

So Christian or disciple? Both words imply a relationship with Jesus, although perhaps disciple is the stronger of the two because it inevitably implies the relationship of pupil to teacher, and Christian is something people might tick on a census (though less and less do) to distinguish from other faiths or none.

But biblically during Jesus' three years of public ministry the Twelve were disciples before they were apostles, and as disciples they were under the instruction of their teacher and lord.

It's a shame, I think that the term disciple didn't extend much beyond the first century and so as disciples of Jesus we take the responsibility to be under discipline seriously. Strangely it does continue in our baptism service, where when I take a small child in my arms I say to them 'fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.' Genuine discipleship, which all baptised Christians are called to be is wholehearted discipleship, hence the second word in the book's title – radical.

The origin of the word radical is a gardening one – going back to our roots. There are different levels of commitment within the Christian community, as Jesus commented so vividly in the parable (see Matthew 13:1–23, Mark 4:1–20, Luke 8:4–15) the difference in the planted seed depends on the soil, and the roots that therefore develop.

Our common way of avoiding radical discipleship is to be selective: choosing those areas in which commitment suits us and staying away from those areas in which it will be costly. But for those of us who call Jesus 'Lord' we cannot pick and choose, so today and in the next 7 reflections, we'll be following John Stott's 8 characteristics of Christian discipleship that are often neglected and yet deserve to be taken seriously.

We begin with non-conformity. Stott comments 'Christians have a double responsibility in relation to the world around us. On the one hand we are to live, serve and witness in the world. On the other hand we are to avoid becoming contaminated by the world. So we are neither to seek to preserve our holiness by escaping from the world nor to sacrifice our holiness by conforming to the world. Escapism and conformism are thus both forbidden to us.'

One of the earliest calls on God's people in the bible is to be holy "because I the Lord am holy" (e.g., Leviticus 11:45; 1 Peter 1:15-16). God said 'you must not do as the Egyptians do, do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the lord your God. (Leviticus 18:3-4). This call towards radical difference is echoed in the New Testament: In the sermon on the mount Jesus spoke of the hypocrites and the pagans, and added, "Do not be like them" (Matthew 6:8). Finally in our bible reading today Paul wrote to the Christian disciples in Rome, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

It is a call to develop a Christian counterculture, a call to engagement without compromise. Today we look at four contemporary trends we are called to resist.

The first is the challenge of pluralism - Pluralism affirms that every "ism" has its own independent validity and an equal right to our respect. It therefore rejects Christian claims to finality and uniqueness, and condemns as sheer arrogance the attempt to convert anybody (let alone everybody) to what it sees as merely our opinions. Yes we respond with humility, not arrogance, but continue to affirm the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. For he is unique in his incarnation (the one and only God-man), unique in his atonement (only he has died for the sins of the world), and unique in his resurrection (only he has conquered death). And since in no other person but Jesus of Nazareth did God first become human (in his birth), then bear our sins (in his death), and then triumph over death (in his resurrection), he is uniquely competent to save sinners. Nobody else possesses his qualifications.

The second is the challenge of materialism. Materialism is not simply an acceptance of the reality of the material world. If that were the case, all Christians would be materialists, since we believe that God has created the material world and made its blessings available to us. God has also affirmed the material order through the incarnation and resurrection of his Son, in the water of baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Christianity is the most material – touch and see- of all the world faiths. Yet we are not materialistic. Materialism—a preoccupation with material things—can smother our spiritual life. Jesus told us not to store up treasure on earth (Matthew 6:19-21) and warned us against covetousness. So did the apostle Paul, urging us instead to develop a lifestyle of simplicity, generosity and contentment, drawing on his own experience of having learned to be content in whatever circumstances. The great spiritual leader Ignatius of Loyola talks about indifference - when we care very much for God and love him above everything, but not for the condition of human life we find ourselves in. Paul added that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6), and then went on to explain that "we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it." Perhaps he was consciously echoing Job who said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart" (Job 1:21). In other words, life on earth is a brief pilgrimage between two moments of nakedness. So we would be wise to travel light. We shall take nothing with us.

The third is the challenge of Ethical relativism. One factor of the present age is the insidious spirit of ethical relativism. All around us moral standards are slipping. This is certainly so in the West. People are

confused as to whether there are any absolutes left. Relativism has permeated culture and is seeping into the church, mostly so in sexual ethics, ever since the 1960s. It used to be universally accepted (and is still the express doctrine of the church of England) that marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual, loving and lifelong union, and the only God-given context for sexual intimacy. Yet anyone who has followed church of England news will know the long debates that have taken place within general synod, which meets again on this issue in a few weeks time – please pray for its members as they meet, there is a move to make and normalise marriage between same-sex partnerships as a legitimate alternative to heterosexual marriage and to ask God’s blessing on such relationships. Over and against these trends Jesus Christ calls his disciples to obedience and to conform to his standards. It is sometimes claimed that Jesus did not speak about these things. But he did. He quoted both Genesis 1:27 (“At the beginning the Creator made them male and female”) and Genesis 2:24 (“A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”) as giving the biblical definition of marriage. And after quoting these Scriptures Jesus gave them his own personal endorsement, saying, “what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19:4-6). Yes, we are called to be kind, loving and inclusive, yet still to only call holy what God has called holy.

I repeat, because this is important, we are not to be completely rigid in our ethical decision-making but to seek sensitively to apply biblical principles in each situation. But fundamental to Christian behaviour is the lordship of Jesus Christ. “Jesus is Lord” remains the basis of our life. So the fundamental question before us as the church is: who is Lord? Is the church the lord of Jesus Christ so that it has liberty to edit and manipulate, accepting what it likes and rejecting what it dislikes, to conform to the world, rather than to pray into being God’s desire for the world according to his word? Or is Jesus Christ our Teacher and our Lord, so that we believe and obey his teaching? Jesus still says to us, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord and do not do what I say?’” (Luke 6:46). To confess Jesus as Lord but not obey him is to build our lives on a foundation of sand. Again, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me,” Jesus said in the upper room (John 14:21).

Here then are two cultures and two value systems, two standards and two lifestyles. On the one side there is the fashion of the world around us; on the other side is the revealed, good and pleasing will of God. John Stott comments that radical disciples have little difficulty in making their choice.

Fourth and finally for today, there is the challenge of narcissism. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a handsome young man who caught sight of his reflection in a pond, fell in love with his own image, toppled into the water and drowned. So “narcissism” is an excessive love for oneself, an unbounded admiration of “self.”

The tendency today is the calls on people to look inside ourselves, to explore ourselves, for the solution to our problems is within. To self-declare who we are, rather than to have something to measure ourselves by. The consequence of this is that we do not need a saviour to come to us from somewhere else; we can be our own saviour. Unfortunately, some of this teaching has permeated the church, with some Christians urging that we must not only love God and our neighbour, but we must also love ourselves. Now, don’t get me wrong. There are some whose self-image is low, but we therefore are called to see ourselves as God sees us, loved by a heavenly Father. But if we simply love ourselves, then the temptation of having no external reference is to do what we please – all that matters is love of self. What then should our attitude be to ourselves? It is a combination of self-affirmation and self-denial—affirming everything in us that comes to us from our creation and redemption, and denying everything that can be traced to the Fall. It is a great relief to turn away from an unhealthy preoccupation with oneself to the healthy commandments of God (united and reinforced by Jesus), to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. For God intends his church to be like himself as Trinity, a community of love, a worshipping and a serving community.

Everybody knows that love is the greatest thing in the world, but only Christians know why. It is because God is love. The thirteenth-century Spanish courtier Raymond Lull (a missionary to Muslims in North Africa) wrote that “he who loves not, lives not.” For living is loving, and without love the human personality disintegrates. That is why everybody is looking for the authentic relationships of love. This love, in Jesus Christ, is something uniquely Christian – we love because he first loved us (1 John 4:9).

Stott concludes this chapter with these words - We have considered four major secular trends that threaten to engulf the Christian community. In the face of these we are all called not to feeble-minded conformity but to radical nonconformity. Over against the challenge of pluralism, we are to be a community of truth, standing up for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Over against the challenge of materialism, we are to be a community of simplicity and pilgrimage. Over against the challenge of relativism, we are to be a community of obedience. Over against the challenge of narcissism, we are to be a community of love.

We are not to be like reeds shaken by the wind, bowing down before gusts of public opinion, but as immovable as rocks in a mountain stream. We are not to be like fish floating with the stream (for “only dead fish swim with the current,” as Malcolm Muggeridge put it), but to swim against the stream, even against the cultural mainstream. We are not to be like chameleons, lizards that change their colour according to their surroundings, but to stand out visibly against our surroundings. What then are Christians to be like if we are not to be like reeds, dead fish or chameleons? Is God’s word entirely negative, simply telling us to avoid being moulded into the shape of those in the world around us? No. It is positive. We are to be like Christ, “conformed to the image of God’s Son” (Romans 8:29).

So as we begin this series, I hope we will take seriously the call to be radical disciples of Jesus. Feel free to ask questions, either after church, or come along Wednesday evenings. All these sermons will be recorded and the services will be on our youtube channel – I’ll make sure too these sermon notes are on our website, and bible study questions will be out before each Wednesday evenings.

Let’s pray (based on Romans 8:29)