

Last week we began our sermon series based on John Stott's book *The Radical Disciple*. We thought about what it means to call ourselves Christian – why that isn't enough, and instead to follow the first Christians in being committed disciples of Jesus – radically challenging the world around us and radically conforming our lives to the pattern of Jesus. We considered what it means to be non-conformist in 4 areas – the challenge of pluralism, materialism, ethical relativism and narcissism. If you missed it, or want to think some more, the sermon is on the website, as well as the whole service on our YouTube channel.

Let's pray

Go on, be honest, who did you have on a poster or picture on your wall when you were younger? Was it a film star, a sports person, or someone else? Even if you didn't have a picture who was it that captured your imagination?

Now, ask yourself the question – is it that you wanted to be them, to emulate them, or did you just admire them for who they were?

This is the question we'll be looking at today, as we study chapter 2 – Christlikeness – are we called as Christian to listen to Jesus, to follow him, or are we called to be like him, and if so, what does that look like?

Stott asks, looking back over his long Christian life – as a young Christian what is God's purpose for his people – having come to faith, what next? Of course, there is the statement in the Westminster catechism – the chief aim of people is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever, or the summary of the law on the lips of Jesus – love God, love neighbour. All seems fine, but are these things wholly satisfactory?

Stott poignantly said, just a few weeks before his death – I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of my pilgrimage on earth. It is this: God wants his people to become like Christ, for Christlikeness is the will of God for the people of God (repeat).

So today, let's look at the biblical basis for the call to Christlikeness. Move on to give some New Testament examples and then draw some practical conclusions.

There is not one single text – but three which we might need to hold together. Turn with me to Romans 8:39 – God has predestined his people to be conformed to the image of his Son. When Adam sinned, he lost much of the divine image there at creation. This is what God restored in Christ. Conformity to the image of God means to be like Jesus, and this is God's plan for us his people. Next 2 Cor 3:18 'we all, with unveiled faces, reflect the Lord's glory and are being transformed into his image with increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit' There is a change when we become Christian and the person and work of the Spirit is our ever-present reality to see this change happen bit by bit. Third 1 John 3:2 'dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is'. If God is working to this end, it is no wonder he calls us to co-operate with him, or in the words of Jesus to his disciples 'follow me' – imitate me.

Some of you might have heard (or even read) the 15th century book by Thomas A Kempis called 'the imitation of Christ'. The book is not actually about imitating Christ at all, it's more nuanced than this, but the choice by A Kempis of this title gives some idea of the importance of this topic.

So, returning to 1 John 3:2 – we don't know, and we do know, we don't know the details of what is to come, but we do know that we will be like Christ. And there's really no need for us to know any more than that, but to glory in the contentment in the amazing truth that one day we will be with Christ and like Christ.

But how – let's now look at some New Testament examples.

- 1) **We are to be like Christ in his incarnation.** It's 71 days till Christmas! Don't want to panic anyone! we might recoil in horror from the idea of being like Christ in this – surely, the incarnation was unique and can't be imitated? Well, yes and no. The incarnation of Jesus – God becoming flesh, the son of God taking our humanity is unique, but we are called to follow the example of his great humility – let's look again at today's bible reading - Phil 2:5-8 . Nb have the same mind – in other word Paul isn't simply providing an understanding of what Jesus did in becoming human – but we are called to have the same mind – to focus on the same things.
- 2) **We are to be like Christ in his service.** (Downe window) the upper room where he spent his last evening with his disciples, he takes off his outer garment, wraps a towel around him (what amazing detail the gospel writer John goes in to), pours water into a basin and washes his disciples' feet. John 13:1-5 – then vv14-15 when he'd finished, he takes his place again at the table and says 'now that I, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you'. Some take Jesus command literally and have a foot-washing ceremony on Maundy Thursday. That's good, but we also need to work out what that means for us today. Jesus performed the work of a slave, so we must regard serving others as our primary task.
- 3) **We are to be like Christ in his love.** St Paul writes in Ephesians 5:2 'live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'. To live a life of love is a calling to make sure all of our behaviour is characterised, motivated by love – Paul's 'gave himself up for us' draws us to the cross. Paul, then, is urging us to be like Christ in his death – to love with Calvary love.

Can you see the bigger picture here – Paul is urging us to be like the Christ of the incarnation, the Christ of the footwashing, and the Christ of the cross. These events in the life of Christ show us what Christlikeness mean in practice – Pauls continues, for instance, later in chapter 5 urging husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. A challenging calling!

- 4) **We are to be like Christ in his patient endurance.** So we turn to Peter – Every chapter of his first letter alludes to the suffering of Christ, all too important as the background of the letter is that the church was being scattered and persecuted. In chapter 2, Peter urges Christian slaves to endure if being punished unjustly, and not to repay evil for evil (1 Peter 2:18). He continues in 1 Peter 2:21 to explain this is our calling, because Christ also suffered, leaving us an example. This calling may become increasingly relevant as persecution increases in many cultures today. Pray for Bishop Jonathan, as he and a few others take what may be an unpopular stance with his colleagues, as he seeks to maintain Godly biblical values in synod next month.
- 5) **We are to be like Christ in his mission.** Having looked at the teachings of Peter and Paul, let's turn to the teachings of Jesus as recorded by John (ch 17:18, 20:21). In prayer, Jesus says to his Father, 'as you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world', and then commissions those who followed him 'as the Father has sent me, I am sending you'. What amazingly significant words. Yes, this is the version of the great commission as recorded by John, rather than Matthew (ch 28), and it gives us Jesus instruction that our mission in the world is to resemble Christ's. How? It is by being 'sent into the world. As Christ had to enter into our world, our calling is to enter other people's world. To teach, preach and to heal, as Jesus called his first followers to do, so too us, in the power of the Spirit. Archbishop Michael Ramsey explained this by saying 'we state and commend the faith only in so far as

we go out and put ourselves inside the doubts of the doubter, the questions of the questioner, and the loneliness of those who have lost their way.'

This is indeed incarnational mission, and all authentic mission is incarnational mission. We are to be like Christ in his mission.

5 ways then in which we are to be Christlike – we are to be like Christ in his incarnation, in his service, in his love, in his endurance and in his mission.

To conclude, here's three practical consequences of this Christlikeness to which we are called.

- 1) **Christlikeness and the mystery of suffering.** Of course, suffering is a huge subject in itself, and there are many ways in which we as Christians try to understand it. But one stand out, and that is that suffering is part of our calling – one of God's ways of making us like Christ. Whether it's a disappointment or a frustration, we need to see in the light of Romans 8:28-29 – according to these verses, God is always working for the good of us his people, and this purpose is to make us more like Christ. The mystery of suffering is also set alongside God's good gift of wholeness and healing so do ask for prayer for healing today too
- 2) **Christlikeness and the challenge of Evangelism.** Why is our sharing of Good news so often unsuccessful? There may be lots of reasons, and it can be oversimplified, but one biblical reason is that we don't look like the Christ we proclaim. John Stott quotes from a book by John Poulton called 'A Today sort of Evangelism' who writes 'The most effective preaching comes from those who embody the things they are saying. They *are* the message... Christians need to look like what they are talking about. It is *people* who communicate primarily, not words or ideas...Authenticity... gets across from deep down inside people... A momentary insincerity can cast doubt on all that has made for communication up to that point...What communicates now is basically personal authenticity. Looking at cross cultural mission, John Stott gives the example of a Hindu professor who says to a Christian student 'If you Christians lived like Jesus Christ, India would be at your feet tomorrow. In our increasingly secular world, I think the same applies to us who identify as Christians too!
- 3) **Christlikeness and the indwelling of the Spirit.** How is Christlikeness possible? In our own strength, impossible! But God has given us his Spirit to enable us to fulfil his purpose. William Temple used to illustrate the point from Shakespeare in this way: It is no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it, I can't. And it's no good showing me a life like Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it, I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like his. And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like his.

God's purpose is to make us like Christ, and God's way is to fill us with his Spirit.

Let us pray...

(prayer for anointing to be Christlike at the end of the service)