

“DISCIPLESHIP – THE BASICS: 1 PRAYER & BIBLE STUDY”

Acts 2:42-47

The passage we have just read, from the very beginning of the life of the Christian Church, is a passage that serves as a great example for us today of how the Christian community could operate. It is not a blueprint that we have to follow slavishly. Nor is it a foolproof plan that would guarantee us success if only we would do as they did. But it does give us an insight into the way in which a group of Christian disciples operated and it can inspire us to adopt the principles which they espoused. I'm sure we will return to this passage at other points in this year of discipleship.

Part of the reason that these verses have become so influential in the life of the Church down through the centuries is that they include the basics of Christian living and there appear to be five aspects of it which I don't think we can ignore today if we want to remain authentically followers of Jesus, if we are serious about being disciples. If you've got your Bibles open you can follow the themes through the verses. Firstly, they “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching*” (v42). The apostles were obviously the people who had been with Jesus, who had spent time with him, who had listened to his teaching and seen him in action. They would be talking of their experiences, retelling the stories of Jesus (which now made sense to them) and linking it all to the teaching of the Old Testament. In effect they were oral Bibles and the people hung on every word.

Secondly, they devoted themselves to **fellowship** (v42) and to sharing (v44f). They wanted to be together, people united in their new-found enthusiasm for the way of Christ, people who wanted everyone to share in the spiritual and material benefits of salvation. Now, we know from the letters that make up much of the rest of the New Testament that this blissful state of unity and sharing didn't last for long and there were soon disputes and inequalities which split communities and tarnished the reputation of the churches, but, at least at the beginning, there was a real desire to be together and enjoy the encouragement and friendship of the Christian disciples.

Thirdly, there was **breaking of bread** and **worship** (vv42,47). When they got together they praised God and they remembered the reason for their togetherness – the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. And reading through the letters of Paul, Peter and the others, it is clear that worship was an indispensable part of being a Christian.

Fourthly, the people were enthusiastic about **prayer** (v42). It was at the heart of all that they did and Luke (who wrote this book of *Acts*) is eager to emphasise it throughout his story. Whether in groups in people's homes, in prison, in good times and in bad, the people prayed. It was, as the hymn writer James Montgomery puts it, “*the Christian's vital breath*”: without prayer they could not have made any progress.

Finally, the new community of disciples **witnessed**. They wanted other people to know what was going on. There was no shyness on their part and – at this point in the story – there was little real persecution. So they were happy to pray together in public places, to share their stories of Jesus, to tell other people why they were acting as they were. As a result of that, they “*enjoyed the favour of all the people*” and the infant Church began to grow. Already there are at least three thousand disciples and by chapter 4 of the story that has grown to over five thousand.

Over the next two or three weeks, then, we are going to look at some of these themes, these basic building blocks of the Church, the foundations of our discipleship. This morning I want to put two of them together (as you'll see from the notice sheet) and consider **prayer** and **Bible study**. I've put them together because they both concern communicating with God and I believe they are the real non-negotiables of discipleship. Without attention to prayer and Bible study there really is no future for you as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In any relationship good communication is vital: you have to talk to your friends or family and you need to listen to them as well. When communication breaks down, the

relationship is starting to go downhill. And so it is with our relationship with God – we need to speak with him and listen to him.

These first disciples very clearly got on with that regularly and frequently. It was part of their routine, part of the fabric of their lives. They met daily and they shared their worship and prayers together. If we are to be effective disciples of Jesus, then we too need to ensure that our communication with God is regular and frequent – indeed, it is something that we need to be involved in daily. It should be a priority in our daily programmes, something that we try to find time for before anything else. Look at the way your days are planned out and see where you can regularly include time for prayer and reading the Bible. It doesn't need to be a huge chunk of time, but enough time certainly, for you to read some Scripture and pray to God. And it needs to be done both privately – on a personal level – and on a collective level. Find time during the week to pray with other Christians and to share with them something of what God has been doing in your life.

But let's look at these two areas of our discipleship a little more closely to see what we really mean. They are words that we often bandy about without, perhaps, really knowing what we mean by them. What is prayer? What does Bible study entail?

PRAYER

The *Church/English Dictionary* defines prayer as “A list of ultimatums given to God when all other avenues have been exhausted.” Is that how you see prayer? Just a quick attempt to get God to help you out in a tight spot. Three religious leaders were talking at their regular ecumenical get-together about prayer and how God answered it for them. The priest related an incident when he'd been on a plane and it had hit some pretty fierce turbulence. The lockers were flying open, people were thrown from their seats and the plane was lurching about all over the place. “I got down on my knees and prayed,” he said, “and suddenly it all became calm around the plane. We looked out of the windows and for a hundred yard around the plane it was completely calm in the middle of that storm.” The vicar said that a similar thing had happened to him on a cross-channel ferry. It was an exceptionally stormy night and the ferry seemed in danger of capsizing, so he dropped to his knees and asked God for help. “The storm seemed to go on raging,” he said, “but for about a hundred metres around our boat it was flat calm and it stayed that way until we reached Calais.” The rabbi chipped in. “I was on my way to the synagogue one Sabbath,” he said, “and as I approached the building I saw on the pavement a holdall stuffed full of five pound notes. It had just been left lying there. Well, I'm not allowed to touch money on the Sabbath, so I got down on my knees to pray and suddenly, for a hundred yards all around me, it was Wednesday.”

Prayer is not simply an arm of the emergency services – although it does help if you pray in times of crisis – nor is it a kind of religious shopping list, because it doesn't necessarily work out quite how you expect. Phyllis Diller tells of an old friend of hers who was starting to get a few wrinkles and prayed that she'd have skin like a teenager. She woke up next morning covered in spots! Prayer is a vital and indispensable part of our lives as disciples. It is, as one person put it, “*like the mortar that holds the bricks together, or the quiet pauses in a symphony. Without the mortar everything falls apart; without the quiet between the notes, no music. And without daily private prayer, Christians face spiritual anorexia.*”

Prayer is speaking with God, as you would a really good friend. As we heard from Anne earlier on, it includes **Thanks, Sorry & Please**. We express to God our gratitude for all that he has done. We praise him for all that he is. We give voice to our regrets, the things that we wish we had done differently, and ask for his forgiveness. And we do ask for his help for ourselves and for those people and situations that cause us concern.

But it also needs to be real. Read through the prayers in the Bible – especially the prayers of Job or those preserved in the Psalms. The French writer, François Fénelon, puts it like this: “*Talk to him in prayer of your wants, your troubles, even of the weariness you feel in serving him. You cannot speak too freely, too*

trustfully, to him.” You can bring to God in prayer your complaints your anger, your resentment, your questions. After all, God knows what you’re thinking anyway. “*Pray as you can and do not try to pray as you can’t,*” wrote the evangelist John Chapman. And if things don’t happen as you want, then share that with God. Keep on sharing it – and eventually there will be a response.

The American novelist, Frederick Buechner, wrote an excellent book on the words we use as Christian. It’s called *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, and under the heading of prayer he has this to say. It’s right at the end of the section, and he has been referring to the occasion when the disciples couldn’t heal an epileptic boy. “*What about when the boy is not healed? When, listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? Who knows? Just keep praying, Jesus says. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge [referring to stories Jesus told]. Even if the boy dies, keep on beating the path to God’s door because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want he will bring himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.*”

“*Just keep praying.*” Don’t skimp on prayer. If you love God, you will want to talk to him. If you are angry with him you will want to give him a good talking to. Whatever the case, keep talking, keep praying – frequently, regularly, aloud, in silence, in words, in pictures, in your room, in the bath, in the street, on your own, with others.

A man was driving up the motorway and suddenly became aware of a police car alongside him signalling him to pull over, which he did. He wound down the window and the policeman said, “Did you know that your wife fell out of the passenger door about three miles back?” “Well that’s a relief,” said the man, turning to look at where his wife had been sitting. “I thought I’d suddenly gone deaf.” There is more to a relationship than talking **to** someone. You need to listen as well.

Partly we listen to God in the silence. Our prayers do not need to be taken up with our own talking. Partly we listen for God in the circumstances of our everyday lives as he guides us through the things that happen to us. Partly we hear the voice of God in other people – in conversation, in advice, in the teaching of church leaders That’s the reason for being “*devoted to the apostle’s teaching*” we learn what God has to say to us through teaching, preaching, reading books, sharing with one another in housegroups and so on. If we are attuned to the Holy Spirit, then we will recognise the answers to our prayers in what is going on around us, and we will learn what God wants us to receive. But probably the most important way in which God communicates with his people is through the pages of the Bible.

BIBLE STUDY

I call it “Bible *study*”, although that probably makes it sound a bit academic – but it’s rather more than simply Bible *reading*. It’s a question of reading the Bible **and** thinking about what you’ve read (or *reflecting* on it, to use the current jargon). The Bible is undoubtedly the world’s greatest book by any measure you care to mention. It cannot be bettered, however people may try. A student professed a desire to become a great writer and when his tutor asked him what he meant by “a great writer” he said that he wanted to write stuff that the whole world would read, stuff that people would react to on a truly emotional level, stuff that would make them howl with laughter, scream in pain, shout out in anger. He fulfilled his ambition and ended up working for Microsoft, writing error messages that appear on computer screens.

The Bible is really what “*the apostles’ teaching*” is for our day – the words that the first apostles spoke and wrote, now preserved for us in the New Testament letters and handily bound with their own experience of Jesus in the Gospels and the long, but vitally important preface, the Old Testament. It helps us to listen for God’s voice and to make sense of the world around us. It gives us the background to what we believe and gives us a glorious vision of what the eternal future holds for us. It is, if you like, the lens

through which we view life and the loudspeaker through which we hear God himself speaking to us. Frederick Buechner, whom I quoted earlier, writes this at the end of his long article on the Bible in *Wishful Thinking*: “If you look **at** a window, you see flyspecks, dust, the crack where Junior’s Frisbee hit it. If you look **through** a window, you see the world beyond. Something like this is the difference between those who see the Bible as a Holy Bore and those who see it as the Word of God, which seeks out of the depths of an almost unimaginable past into the depths of ourselves.”

This is how God speaks to us. It is how we feed our spiritual selves. Just reading the Bible as a work of literature or as a text book may help us win arguments, but there is far more to it than that. As the great C S Lewis said, “A man can’t always be defending the truth. There must be a time to feed on it.” This is stuff that is from the mouth of God himself. As we read in *2 Timothy 3:16*, it is all inspired by him and it’s all useful for us in our Christian lives. It get right to the point, as we read in *Hebrews 4:12* – it can get right under the skin and really cause us to think about our behaviour and attitudes.

So read it regularly. Maybe a few verses or a couple of chapters each day. You might want to read it right through from beginning to end – that’s probably the most difficult way to do it but if you use Eugene Peterson’s version *The Message* it does really come alive. It may be better to get hold of some daily Bible reading notes which give you a few verses to read each day and then offer some comment on them that can be very helpful. Pat Cartmale can give you some advice on that and maybe order them for you. Getting involved in a housegroup can also help, where there is the opportunity to discuss a passage and draw out the important lessons from it together with other Christians (and get some of that fellowship we mentioned at the beginning).

Read it. Get some help with it – written or spoken. (I cannot recommend too highly a book by Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee called *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*.) If you’re struggling, have a word with me or Liz (go for Liz – she’s the one who’s just finished college, so there won’t be anything she doesn’t know!). Think about what you read – what is God saying to you through it? how can you put what it says into practice? how does it chime in with what you are actually doing? And then, of course, get on and do what it says. And come back to it again and again. We’ve got quite a lot of books in our house and just a few of them are read so much that they’re falling apart – nineteenth century novels and cartoon strip books mainly (I’ll leave you to work out which are Sally’s and which are mine). But a person who is serious about God, about being a disciple, will usually have a Bible that is pretty well worn. As they say, Bibles that are falling apart are read by people who aren’t.

Those first disciples “*devoted themselves*” to all this. It wasn’t a passing fad. It wasn’t just a curious interest. The Greek word used is *προσκαρτερεῶ* (*proskartereo*) which has the idea of constancy and real purpose behind it. They were enthusiastic about this. They really wanted to get involved in the story of Jesus and God’s love. They were passionate about communicating with the God who had saved them through his Son and who had empowered them through his Holy Spirit. Real disciples are passionate people. Are you?

If you are really serious about discipleship, you cannot afford to neglect prayer and Bible study. They are really prerequisites of a life committed to following Jesus. Now, as we’ve said, this is not a blueprint nor a check list. But look what happened as they got stuck in to this way of life. There were awesome goings-on (*v43*) and the Church grew rapidly (*v47*). I know some of you think the church is big enough already and life’s not quite as comfortable as it used to be, but I believe God’s got a lot more he wants to do with us and amongst us here. Let’s get stuck in to prayer and Bible study and watch as God works in our lives and in this community.

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This passage serves as a great example for us today of how the Christian community could operate. It is not a blueprint, nor is it a foolproof plan; but it does give us an insight into the way in which a group of Christian disciples operated and it can inspire us to adopt the principles which they espoused.

These verses include the basics of Christian living:

- They "*devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching***" (v42).
- They devoted themselves to **fellowship** (v42) and to sharing (v44f).
- There was **breaking of bread** and **worship** (vv42,47).
- They were enthusiastic about **prayer** (v42).
- The new community of disciples **witnessed**.

This week we are considering **prayer** and **Bible study**: the real non-negotiables of discipleship. In any relationship good communication is vital. In our relationship with God we need to speak with him and listen to him.

These first disciples very clearly got on with that regularly and frequently. It was part of their routine, part of the fabric of their lives. They met daily and they shared their worship and prayers together. If we are to be effective disciples of Jesus, then we too need to ensure that our communication with God is regular and frequent.

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Prayer is not simply an arm of the emergency services, nor is it a kind of religious shopping list. Prayer is speaking with God and it includes **Thanks, Sorry & Please**. But it also needs to be real. You can bring to God in prayer your complaints your anger, your resentment, your questions. After all, God knows what you're thinking anyway. If you love God, you will want to talk to him. If you are angry with him you will want to give him a good talking to. Whatever the case, keep talking, keep praying – frequently, regularly, aloud, in silence, in words, in pictures, in your room, in the bath, in the street, on your own, with others.

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So we need to read it regularly. Get some help with it – written or spoken. Think about what you read – what is God saying to you through it? how can you put what it says into practice? how does it chime in with what you are actually doing? And then, of course, get on and do what it says.

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the story of Jesus and God's love. They were passionate about communicating with the God who had saved them through his Son and who had empowered them through his Holy Spirit.

If you are really serious about discipleship, you cannot afford to neglect prayer and Bible study. They are really prerequisites of a life committed to following Jesus. As we've said, this is not a blueprint nor a check list. But as the first disciples adopted this way of life, there were awesome goings-on (v43) and the Church grew rapidly (v47).

Questions for discussion

1. To what extent should we simply copy the example of the first Christians? What are the benefits/dangers of such an approach?
2. What would you say are the "non-negotiable" aspects of discipleship?
3. How would you define prayer?
4. Should prayer be a habit? Why/why not?
5. Share anything you find particularly helpful in the way you pray.
6. What do you find useful about reading the Bible regularly? What do you find difficult?
7. To what extent should we engage in prayer and Bible study corporately? How can that best be arranged?