

Readings:

Psalm 56: 1-11

John 14: 1-11

Trusting, abiding, believing

Who do you trust? Why? In what way do you trust them? With your money? With your life? With your secrets? Is this someone you can always turn to for help or sympathy? What is it about them that makes you trust them?

Do you trust God? Do you trust God's word in the bible? Do you trust in his living Word, Jesus? Trust is an important part of discipleship, of being a disciple. The first disciples trusted Jesus when they responded to his invitation to follow him – they trusted him although they surely didn't understand much about him – other than that there was a lot of excitement around him and good things happened when he was around.

Trust, faith and belief are closely linked. The disciples didn't always get it right – in Matthew 14: 31 we read about Peter trying to follow Jesus walking on the water – and failing. 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' said Jesus. If Peter had trusted instead of looking down at his feet he too could have walked on the water. In Matthew 16:8 Jesus again chided the disciples for their lack of faith and understanding after the feeding of the multitude. And then in Matthew 17:19-20 when the disciples proved unable to heal an epileptic boy Jesus told them it was because they lacked faith. But he added by way of encouragement that faith only needs to be as small as a mustard seed for great things to happen. Finally in Matthew 21:21, after Jesus had cursed a fig tree for not producing fruit, so that it immediately withered and died – to the wonderment of the disciples – he told them to have faith and not to doubt. Pray in faith and your prayers will be answered, Jesus said. Faith and trust go hand in hand.

The disciples struggled with understanding what Jesus was about but they seemed to have no problem with trusting him as they followed him around the Palestinian countryside. Their experience was that they didn't go hungry and when the Pharisees tried to make life difficult, Jesus always got the upper hand. Trusting Jesus was not the problem. The difficulty was trying to grasp the enormity of what was happening – that someone who could do the things that only God could do was alive with them and appeared, in other respects to be a normal human being. When Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, who is this? asked the disciples. Perhaps they had in mind the verse from Psalm 89:9 You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them, and Psalm 107:29 he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed – both references to the power of God to control the weather and the sea. Could that really mean that Jesus was God?

Although Jesus taught them and explained his parables, especially when they were away from the crowds, they couldn't fully understand him because they could only see him through the lens of their understanding of what the Messiah would be and do. Within that context the idea that he would suffer and die made no sense. They trusted Jesus but they couldn't see how he could be the Messiah if he was going to die, as he predicted that he would.

As the disciples struggled with the idea that Jesus was about to die he encouraged them to have faith, to believe in him, to trust him. When they still didn't get it, he told them to think about all they had seen him do – all the healings, all the teaching – surely that showed that here was God among them. They trusted him and had faith in him, but their beliefs about him were based on a misunderstanding – that the Messiah would be a great leader who would rescue the people from the occupying Roman power, and restore Israel to its former glory. But Jesus was not that kind of Messiah. He had come to rescue the people, but from the power of evil – a spiritual Saviour not a political one. Jesus wanted the disciples to believe what their eyes told them – if he did the things that only God could do, then put two and two together – he must be God. It was important they grasped this because the biggest test of their trust was about to happen.

And the biggest test was the crucifixion and the events surrounding it. And basically – they failed – when Jesus was arrested they all ran off and deserted him. Well, what could they have done? But they didn't fail completely – they stayed together and they stayed in Jerusalem. If they felt their trust in Jesus had been misplaced at least they trusted one another enough to stay together. Perhaps it was the women of the group who made the difference – they were the ones who watched as Jesus suffered and died. Perhaps they sensed that this wasn't the end of the story.

Certainly the love of the women who followed Jesus made a difference – they were the ones who got up early on the Sunday morning and went to the tomb. They went to take care of the body – but what did they find? Not a body but an angelic messenger who tells them Jesus is alive. And on their way back to tell the others they meet the risen Lord. The first people to see Jesus risen and alive were the women – the ones who had trusted and cared enough to be at his death – they became the first evangelists carrying the good news of the Resurrection to the still sceptical disciples.

Later that day when they were all gathered, Jesus came to them – he had returned just as he had promised he would. The disciples saw him and at last they believed. Their trust and faith in him had not been misplaced – now they knew who he was and it all began to make sense. Then they received the Holy Spirit and their transformation was complete.

Before the crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples had trusted Jesus and stuck with him, despite the opposition he faced. Although they didn't fully understand Jesus, they had faith in him. They knew he was special and that being with him was right. Trust is based on relationship not understanding or knowledge. It comes from experience and knowing the person. Jesus had warned them that he must die – which they didn't understand – but he had promised to return and he did. His overcoming of death proved who he was, and showed that all he had taught them was true – God's kingdom had come in the person of Jesus.

In John ch.15 Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches. The branches have to stay connected to the vine otherwise they wither and die. So he says we must abide in him. Where you abide is where you live, where you make your home. We are told to make our home in God, and he will live in us. Live in God, live in his love, live in his word the Bible, and these will all live in us. Abiding is a matter of the heart – home is, after all, where the heart is. Is your heart in God? Having God at the centre of life doesn't exclude other things like family, home and work, but it does set the context

within which those things happen. It makes a big difference to how we see things and approach life in general.

But discipleship is not only about our hearts. It is also about our minds. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.’ That renewing of our minds is the work of the Holy Spirit in us and helps us to see the world and life from God’s perspective not that of the world. It helps us to believe and have a real and living faith in the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the one who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all. It enables us to trust in his living Word, his Son, Jesus Christ, as well as his written word, the Bible. And it helps us to trust in his power made real in us by the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we believe certain things as expressed in the creed, which we say each week in whatever version. Some of those things such as the Resurrection are beyond the belief of many people – and if they are honest they say so. Others might say they believe but to the rest of us it seems to make no difference to their lives. But if you believe – and trust – in the one who is the Risen Lord it must make a difference. It must give you hope that in this life God will be with you no matter what, and in the life to come you will have a place in the Kingdom. As Jesus said, and we heard this earlier in our second reading ¹ Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.’ This is Jesus’ promise to us – a promise that cannot fail because it is based on the loving faithfulness of God. It assures us that if we trust in him our future, even beyond this life, is certain. Jesus prepares a place for us to dwell – abide – where we will be with him for ever.

Jesus also promises the Holy Spirit to all who ask – ‘If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’ Luke 11:13. The Holy Spirit makes real in us the life of the Kingdom, eternal life – the life of God that begins in the here and now and is not ended by death. If we are truly abiding in God and he in us then we are already living that life.

God calls us to follow him just as Jesus called his disciples. We are called to be disciples too – the followers of Jesus who abide in him and he in them. It’s about our relationship with him before it’s about what we might do. We are called into a loving relationship with God so that as we believe and trust in him and he abides in us, we can become the person God wants us to be.

It won’t always be easy. As the first disciples found, it can be very hard. We know that several of them went on to suffer for their faith in the years of the early church as it spread around the eastern Mediterranean in the years after that first Pentecost. There were many martyrs in the early church including several of the disciples, and Paul. When Jesus told his followers to take up their cross for some it became the literal truth as several of the disciples were eventually crucified themselves. We too must be ready to face bad times as well as good.

Suffering, however it comes about, is a real test of our faith and trust in God. Paul tells us that if we put our faith in Christ then we become co-heirs with him of the kingdom of God, but if we are heirs with him we must be prepared to suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:17). When we suffer, for whatever reason, we are sharing in Christ's suffering on the cross. And he is with us in our pain, and has not deserted us, however much it may feel like it. It is very sad when people lose their faith through suffering, but if we remain faithful we are assured that blessings will come. Mother Julian tells us 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

Belief and trust in God is not a lucky charm. It won't keep trouble and suffering away. But we have that promise that as we abide in him and he in us he will never leave us. And Paul also tells us that nothing in the whole of creation, and nothing that might happen, can ever separate us from the love of God (Romans 8: 38-39). We need to keep that in mind as the world is so full of pain and suffering at this time – natural disasters, conflict and war – and the threat of worse to come. Our faith may well be put to the test in the days ahead.

So, as we think about discipleship in our own lives, as individuals and as Immanuel Church how do you respond to God's call in your life? Are you ready to put your trust in God? Is your faith in him sure? Does that make a real difference in your life? What do you think would help you grow in faith and trust in God? Is there something we can do to help? Our journey of faith is helped through reading God's word and through prayer, to build up that sense of trust as well as guiding our beliefs. That's a journey that doesn't have to be followed alone – we are all journeying on a pilgrimage of faith, and we are here to help one another.

As we grow in faith, if we believe and trust in God's love for us, if we make that the foundation on which we live, as he lives in us through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live as his disciples. Then as we grow in faith and trust, and our relationship with Jesus deepens, and we can make him known to others.

To him be the glory. Amen.

©Marion Gray
23rd September 2017