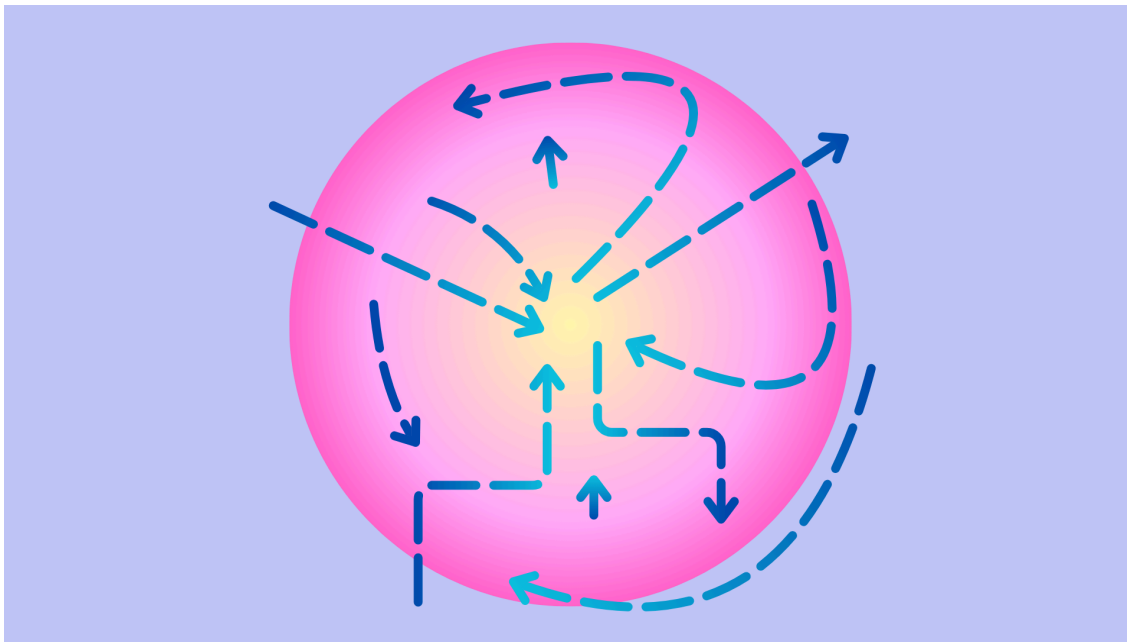


Sunday 16th February 2025 - Service led by Alex Johnson

Call to Worship

I'm going to ask the AV team to put up a picture. However, it's not going to make any sense, it looks like a cross between a mindfulness app and the opening credits to Dad's Army, but don't worry about that just now; believe it or not it is connected to our reading. At the centre of that circle is Jesus, the focus of our faith. Really, all our lives are lived in reference to him, all we do is lean into or away from him, and that's the circle around Jesus in the picture. The question of discipleship is the question of how we are moving within that space. Are we making a dramatic beeline right to the centre? Are we being equally as dramatic in the opposite direction? Are we circling, in orbit around the Sun of Righteousness, stable and consistent. Are we drifting outwards or edging inwards? How are we, individually and collectively, moving within that space?



I guess in an ideal world, we would always be drawing inwards towards Jesus, but the rhythms and events of life mean that isn't reality. So, I'm not asking you to pass a negative judgement on yourself or others, but simply reflect on that question, how are you moving within that space around Jesus?

Reading - *Luke 6:17-26*

¹⁷When Jesus had come down from the hill with the apostles, he stood on a level place with a large number of his disciples. A large crowd of people was there from all over Judea and from Jerusalem and from the coast cities of Tyre and Sidon; ¹⁸they had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those who were troubled

by evil spirits also came and were healed. ¹⁹All the people tried to touch him, for power was going out from him and healing them all.

²⁰Jesus looked at his disciples and said,

“Happy are you poor; the Kingdom of God is yours! ²¹Happy are you who are hungry now; you will be filled! Happy are you who weep now; you will laugh! ²²Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and say that you are evil, all because of the Son of Man! ²³Be glad when that happens and dance for joy, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven. For their ancestors did the very same things to the prophets.

²⁴But how terrible for you who are rich now; you have had your easy life! ²⁵How terrible for you who are full now; you will go hungry! How terrible for you who laugh now; you will mourn and weep! ²⁶How terrible when all people speak well of you; their ancestors said the very same things about the false prophets.

Sermon

So let's return to that messy circle of arrows. This represents something of what is happening in our reading. At the centre of all this, there is Jesus but all around Jesus there are a whole variety of people. To give you an idea of the context of our passage, the ministry of Jesus is in full swing. We heard two weeks ago about how he had gone from town to town teaching and performing miracles. Last week, he called his first disciples after a dramatic catch of fish. Just before our reading this morning, Jesus went up a mountain to pray. Upon his return, he named his apostles, his group of twelve: Simon (also known as Peter), Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James Bar-Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas Bar-James, and Judas the future traitor. Those twelve are there, right next to Jesus, but there are others present as well. The twelve were picked from a larger group of disciples and our passage says that crowd of followers were still gathered around him that day. Not only that, but people from Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre, and Sidon, had come to hear Jesus and be healed. People were trying to touch Jesus, for simply a touch was enough to get you healed. In this context, as Moses did before him, Jesus has descended from the mountain and begins to preach the Sermon on the Plain, his manifesto for the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps now the chaos of this circle begins to feel appropriate. There are different levels of discipleship going on, a great movement of people each trying to get to Jesus for their own reasons. Perhaps the reference to Jerusalem indicates that even some hostile to Jesus were there, come to critique him rather than be blessed by him. That would certainly be in keeping with the numerous run-ins Jesus has had over the last few chapters. It is an intense space containing multiple needs and levels of engagement. From the committed apostles, some of whom we're told gave up everything to follow Jesus. To dedicated disciples eager to hear more from the teacher who has captured their attention. To those in need who have been told there's a chance they could be helped, if only they can get close enough. To the suspicious, coming to make up their own minds about all this hype. In the centre of

this maelstrom, is Jesus. No wonder he had a quiet night by himself the night before, he'd have needed it!

Jesus looks at his disciples and says:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

What's happening as Jesus says these words? How are these different groups of people responding to what Jesus says as he begins the Sermon on the Plain? These are his opening lines, his hook for a further twenty-two verses, and how are they affecting the different people present?

His apostles must have been greatly encouraged. After all, the two stories of call we heard in chapter five both end with the phrase, they “left everything and followed him.” Their lives have become fundamentally ordered around Jesus, they have given up their livelihoods to follow him. So, they are reassured by Jesus that their sacrifice will not be forgotten. The road may be tough, particularly socially, but they will have a reward in heaven. Their decision to follow Jesus is validated. At this point they must have been feeling confident, secure in their tight orbit around Jesus.

What about the next layer? Jesus' wider body of disciples. I wonder how many of them were eager to go further, seeking to be a part of a revolution where their fortunes would be reversed. Hoping to claim a stake in the kingdom of God, be filled, and be merry. How many were challenged by this, feeling like they were on the wrong side of these blessings and woes. Unsure of what that meant. Caught between their affection for Jesus and his uncomfortable message, wondering if this really was a movement meant for them. Or maybe I'm being uncharitable, and they had picked up enough of what Jesus was about to be committed to this new way of life, regardless of what it cost them. In this middle group, Jesus' words could land a bit differently, depending on the circumstances of the listener. For those of you who read my message in the weekly email, perhaps this is a response you recognise. In this part of the circle, it is not so much validation this wider body of disciples receive but an invitation.

What about those on the edge? The one seeking healing must have been overjoyed. No longer were they being overlooked, no longer were they barred from participation in religious matters, no longer the outsiders, the excluded. Here was a movement in

which they had a place. The path opens before them to draw near to Jesus. But what about those who had their doubts about him? Was their interest peaked by the radicalness of Jesus' statements? Or did it simply confirm to them his dangerous populist support base?

How are these people reacting to these words? Do they feel themselves coming closer to Jesus? Do they feel edged out? Are they scared of what he is saying? Are they getting ready to run a mile or throw themselves in? By standing on this plain, addressing his disciples in the middle of this wider gathering of people, Jesus is giving a window into his mission, giving people an opportunity to be drawn in or put off by his agenda. Apostle, disciple, crowd, and critic are all being shown what it means to follow Jesus and each are responding in their own way. I wonder where you would place yourself within this circle? And in what direction are you headed?

Yet, this is not just a personal question. Within the Sermon of the Plain, Jesus lays out a wider social agenda. The Gospel of Luke is often credited with championing this down-to-earth, social revolutionary character to Jesus. Looking at it from this wider point of view, what kind of person is being drawn in? What kind of person is being put off? As we imagine the impact of Jesus' words, it seems clear who is being drawn in. Either, those with little to lose or those who are willing to lose what they have. For many have come for healing, desperate to be made whole again. They are being welcomed as legitimate participants in this movement. Many have already made a sacrifice in order to follow Jesus, they are being held up as examples of faith.

Perhaps within this revolution lies the seeds of Judas' betrayal. Perhaps here was the moment that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus felt they had to keep a bit of distance, despite their conviction. Perhaps here lay the foundations of Palm Sunday, with the crowds celebrating their saviour; perhaps here lay the reality of Good Friday, when these blessings proved too much for people to bear.

“Happy are you poor; the Kingdom of God is yours! Happy are you who are hungry now; you will be filled! Happy are you who weep now; you will laugh! Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and say that you are evil, all because of the Son of Man! Be glad when that happens and dance for joy, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven. For their ancestors did the very same things to the prophets.”

All of these complex facets of what Jesus is saying is the space of discipleship and at different times we are moving within it in different ways. At different times we feel differently about being a disciple. We take on each of those arrows at different points of our lives. Sometimes made uneasy by what we are hearing. Sometimes eager to get to the heart of it all. Sometimes just edging our way out. It's not a problem to be moving around in this space. Even the apostles, encouraged by what Jesus

proclaimed at this point in time, nevertheless abandoned him in the end, taking a beeline straight out of the circle. With eleven of them returning again to the fold. This is a space for you to move about in, in so doing we have to wrestle with the question of who Jesus was and what was his agenda. And what might that mean for me, for us, today.

So, the first challenge of today is not to judge your movements but to describe them. How you are moving in this space and why. What is pulling you closer? What is putting you off?

The second challenge is to reflect on the same thing more corporately. We are here, individually and collectively, to represent Christ in the world. As we observe people dancing in and around church, do we see the biases of Jesus in play? Are we surrounded by people with nothing to lose? People who are willing to lose what they have? Either way, I wonder how we are going to collectively move in response to that question. For the person who spoke these words, is the person whom we profess to orientate ourselves around. These syllables were formed not by minister, who's as likely to get it wrong as right, but they were sounded out by the source of our salvation.

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets.”

If it is any consolation, those words make me nervous. So, I wonder what I'm going to do about it?

If you have any comments or questions about this sermon, Alex can be contacted at ajohnson@churchofscotland.org.uk.