

Sunday 25 March 2012 – “The Path of Obedience”

Text: John 12:20-33

It must have been an amazing experience for Jesus' disciples as they accompanied Jesus during the years of his earthly ministry: to be with him as he changed water into wine; fed the 5,000; calmed the storm; healed the sick and raised some from the dead and all of this accompanied by his authoritative teaching. The disciples must have reached the stage of wondering just what was coming with each new day.

Yet, there were also the more perplexing times, unexpected, bewildering moments when Jesus said or did things they couldn't quite follow. The passage we have read this morning from John's gospel must surely have been one of those occasions. A group of Greek visitors who are hoping to see Jesus, or as the words translate are “earnestly wanting to speak to” Jesus, approach Philip who in turn approaches Andrew and together they go to Jesus to let him know. But Jesus' response must have left them quite baffled and bewildered as to what he was talking about.

*“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”* With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Jesus is talking about his death and all that is would mean and accomplish. Though Jesus speaks with courage and determination here, we shouldn't overlook the costly path of obedience that Jesus has willingly chosen to tread in his life and ministry in order to remain constantly faithful to his Father's will. From the start, Jesus' willingness to come to earth in human form was in itself an act of loving obedience; he humbled himself at his baptism to identify fully with the predicament of sinful mankind and remained steadfastly obedient in honouring God alone through the temptations in the desert. In every unfolding aspect of his ministry, Jesus demonstrated obedient surrender to his Father's will, being himself an example of one who was willing to ‘hate’ his life, to count his own life as nothing, in order to faithfully complete the work his Father has given him to do. As he moved inexorably towards the moment of deepest agony at the Cross, so much of the nights and early mornings in prayer when Jesus would withdraw to lonely places on his own, must have been spent wrestling with, coming to terms with and submitting to pursue that path to the Cross.

The prospect of physically dying on a Cross would have been appalling enough accompanied as it would be by all the mockery and rejection of the crowd, but there was the far more fearful and agonising prospect for Jesus of having to face the Father himself – the one to whom he had been inseparably bound for all eternity – and to face the full terror of his holy and righteous anger, as Jesus took on himself the punishment for all the sins of the world. No wonder he was filled with such anguish, even revulsion at the path ahead. *“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.”*

There was so much hanging on this hour, to realise at last the long-awaited fulfilment of God's loving plan of salvation for mankind. Whereas God's first covenant with his people based on the 10 commandments and the Law had failed because of their stubbornness and rebellion, as we come to Jeremiah 31:31-34 that we read earlier, we discover God's amazing response. Far from rejecting his people, forever, God promises a new covenant that will be so different from the first covenant because it will be entirely based on God's grace. V 34: God will “forgive his people's wickedness and remember their sins no more”, and in a beautiful oneness of relationship, He will at last be their God and they his people. “The time is coming’ – declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah”, and now so many hundreds of years on – Jesus declares that hour has come; the hour has come when that prophecy and promise will be fulfilled not only for Israel but all nations. And yet Jesus knows that its fulfilment rests on him alone and on his willingness to remain obedient unto death on the Cross. Though humanly speaking he might long that there could be another way, even as he asks the question, he knows there isn't, that there cannot be any other way, and so comes his impassioned cry: “Father, glorify your name!”; and God's response: “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” To glorify, to honour his Father has been the driving force of Jesus' life and ministry, his heartfelt

desire all the way through. And God in turn both affirms His approval of his Son's ministry thus far: in Jesus' steadfast selfless obedience he has continually brought glory to God; and affirms the last supreme act of obedience unto death that Jesus is about to make in which he will bring final glory to God and himself be glorified through that obedience.

What of the disciples' path of obedience? When the disciples left everything to follow Jesus, they could never have imagined that the climax of Jesus' ministry would end in his death. There are glimpses along the way of how they perhaps thought things could and should end. In the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus that we read a few weeks ago, Peter's suggestion that they put up booths for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, has the inference that Peter thought that was a climactic moment, that he wanted to make permanent. They have just walked into God's glorious presence and there is nothing else to do or face. Or there was the expectation most forcibly voiced by Judas that Jesus would at any moment mount an uprising that would liberate Israel from Roman rule, and the disciples would share in the glory of that victory with him.

In the same way that Jesus faithfully and courageously learned obedience to fulfil his Father's will, so the disciples too would learn in time what it meant to truly follow Jesus and live their lives for him. There were some hard lessons to learn first, however, as the events leading up to Jesus' death unfolded and between them they betrayed, deserted, and denied Jesus and abandoned him to his fate. Yes, they had each given up everything to follow Jesus, but when the going got really tough, they were all found wanting. It's difficult to imagine what they felt like on the Friday night and all through Saturday – the crushing pain of grief, guilt, shame, failure – and no way of making amends – Jesus was gone and what a prospect for them at that point, that they were going to have to live with that guilt for the rest of their lives: face to face with the shallowness of their devotion and commitment to Jesus.

It wasn't of course the end of the story, but they were all very different people who met the risen Jesus on the Sunday, with mixtures of fear, incredulity and wonder. Their own journeys to obedience now begin. At the end of John's gospel as Jesus gently reinstates Peter, his repeated questions, "Do you love me?", both address the restoring of Peter's relationship with Jesus and drive home just how much will be demanded of Peter, and indeed the other disciples, as they follow in Jesus' footsteps to serve him. But there is a seismic shift for the disciples in their pre- and post-Easter experience and outlook. They have moved from confusion to growing understanding and conviction; from fear to growing confidence and trust; from being men who loved their lives when the going got tough, to those who would also become willing to count their own lives as nothing in obediently pursuing Jesus' commission to preach the gospel, to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour in Jerusalem and beyond. They have the encouragement of Jesus' own example to follow, the assurance of his presence forever with them and the assurance that God will honour their faithful service. And the church worldwide today is testimony to God's having honoured them and indeed others in successive generations willing to count themselves as nothing for the sake of the gospel and for some to become further grains of wheat that would fall to the ground and die in order to produce an abundant harvest of saved lives.

What of ourselves and our own paths to obedience? We are also called to follow the obedience of Jesus, humbly to honour God in our lives and service. It's an act of submission and obedience when we come to faith in Jesus, no longer choosing to go our own way in life, but instead to give our lives to Jesus and to allow him to be Lord of our lives, to put him and what is important to him first in our lives. To continue to follow Jesus also calls for a daily conscious choice obediently to go his way and not our own or that of the world. There is a need to consciously go against the flow of so many of the messages and values of the world around us – the expectation of fulfilment in wealth, status and recognition; the need for instant everything; that there is no such thing as right and wrong anymore and anything goes. It's very easy to get sucked in subconsciously by all these messages and values that bombard us almost everywhere we go. During his time on the pastoral team at All Souls Church in London, Rico Tice used to meet each week with John Stott, the Rector, for a time of prayer. He was rather taken aback one week when John Stott brought up something he wanted to confess and ask forgiveness for, because it was something that was such a small misdemeanour that it didn't register on his own radar as something that needed to be forgiven. Yet

it was something that concerned John Stott and spoke of the sincere level of his humility and desire for obedience to God in his ministry that was set very high. We need to keep aiming high, higher than high, in the Lord's enabling, to keep going against the flow, to maintain a close walk with Jesus and to be distinctive salt and light for him wherever we are.

Not only are there temptations out in the world to resist, but we are also faced with an increasing sense of being in the line of fire of a number of powerful groups in society today. Many members of the militant atheist group, the aggressive gay lobby and advocates of strict secularism, regard Christians as interchangeably sad, deluded fools, a nuisance or contemptible for the beliefs, values and views we hold. It is disquieting to see how quickly things can change. Not so very long ago arguments to make prayers at Council meetings or the wearing of a crucifix illegal would have been quite unheard of. Obediently going against the flow and standing firm are actions that are getting and will probably continue to get ever harder and there's a real sense in which the rather extreme language used by Jesus in the need to "*hate*" our lives in order to remain faithful and obedient to him - to continue to proclaim him as Lord and Saviour, to be willing to speak up against legislation and policies that threaten our freedom to honour and remain obedient to Jesus – becomes altogether appropriate in the times we are living in.

When I was teaching in China, I used to invite smaller groups of students to my flat each afternoon for conversation practice. I used to start things off with a question and one of those was: "If you could have one wish in life what would it be?" As we went round the group, there were answers like: a successful job, a big house; to be wealthy; to meet David Beckham. And then we came to the student whose English name was Michelle and she said: "I would wish that everyone in China could know how much their heavenly Father loves them, because that's a message they really need to hear." It would take an enormous amount of courage for a student in this country to say that in a tutorial group, but there we were sitting in the midst of communist China. Yet there was no fear or awkwardness as she spoke, but her deep love for Jesus, her gratefulness for all that he had done in her life and concern that others might share in that also, were all that shone from her face and were the driving force in her life. And that's what it's all about really isn't it. That's where we'll find the ongoing inspiration and strength to keep pursuing the path of obedience – in the knowledge that we have a wonderful Saviour, in our heartfelt joy and gratitude for Jesus' love in our lives, for the healing, restoring, transforming work he is doing in us and the compelling desire that others should know and receive his love and life and hope in their lives also. There are so many around us who are feeling lost, empty, broken, because what they thought to put their trust in for fulfilment in life has still left a vacuum or has crumbled to nothing and they don't know where else to turn. We have a vital message and the love of Jesus to share with them.

We are finally also called on the path of obedience to be constantly open to God's leading in our lives as we serve him. That can be a risky business! In entrusting our lives to God we can find ourselves traveling in all sorts of places we never thought we would, discovering giftings we never knew we had. But God knows our gifts and it is his deep desire that we each be blessed and blossom in our lives and in our service, to find our full potential in life and to find true fulfilment in the service and work he has prepared for us to do. These can only be found in humbly, trustingly pursuing the path of obedience.

The path of obedience is not an easy path; there are costs in going against the flow; in standing firm in the face of opposition. But we have a wonderful Saviour who inspires us and accompanies us on the path; we have a wonderful God who honours even the humblest offerings of service we bring; and whose desire is to bless us richly in our obedience and service for him; and we have a vital and powerful message to share generously with a needy and lost world around us. May these be the constant encouragement and driving force to keep us on the path of obedience.