

**Images of Discipleship –
“Gathered”**

So I have a number of readings this morning:

The first is Luke 6 verse 12:

“One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”

The next is Luke 8 verse 1:

“After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases:

Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.”

The next is Luke 10 verse 1:

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.”

The next is Acts 1 verse 15:

“In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)...”

And the final one for now is Acts 2 verse 40:

“With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

So what’s the link this morning?

What stands out to you and where you would go with this passage?

We could talk about growth.

Clearly this was a group of people that grew and grew and grew...

And despite what you might have heard, that hasn't stopped.

- Research by Operation World makes clear that **Iran** is home to the fastest growing church in the world. Some estimate that over one million people have come to know Christ.
- But did you know that in 1970 there were 11.4 million Christians in East Asia (that is China, Korea and Japan), making up 1.2 percent of the population. In 2015 there were 171 million Christians, which is 10.5 percent of the population. In 2010 in the entire Asia region there were 287 million Christians. Today there is an estimated 383 million(!)
- In 1910 only 12 million or 9 percent of the population in Africa were Christians; today the number 630 million, which 49.3 percent of the populace. Last Sunday *in each* of the nations of Nigerian, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa individually, there were more Anglicans in church than there were Anglicans in all of Britain and the United States combined.
- There are now 622.5 million Pentecostals worldwide and by 2050 there will be more Pentecostals than Hindus.¹

Now, numbers aren't everything and there are different types of growth

Numerical growth is one measure and isn't one we should ignore, but it is only one measure.

It could be about the 'E' word – evangelism.

- When you read the text you do see a group of people on a mission, literally. Their worship led to mission and mission led to worship and the worship was predominantly but not exclusively in words. And when you think about those numbers I shared, that growth has come predominantly through the verbal sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ.

It could be about names.

- Scripture goes out its way to name all sorts of people, from all sorts of backgrounds, called to follow Jesus. It's a reminder that Jesus does call people by name. It knows you and me... by name.

¹ [The Society for Pentecostal Studies at 50 Years in: Pneuma Volume 42 Issue 3-4 \(2020\) \(brill.com\)](https://www.brill.com/journals/Pentecostalism-in-Asia/Pentecostalism-in-Asia-Volume-42-Issue-3-4-2020)

Where I want to go this morning is in the area of discipleship.

As we've talked about in the last few weeks, to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is to be a disciple of King Jesus.

And to be a disciple means that our whole lives are governed by him; Jesus' pardon we receive, his example to follow, his teaching to obey, his presence to experience, his love to share and his good news to proclaim.

So we looked at the military metaphor of being soldiers in a fight.

And to be a Christian for even a short amount of time means recognising that at times the fight is rough and it is real.

Last week I talked about this description of being 'strangers and aliens in the world'; of not fitting and being outsiders at times with cultural values, goals and aspirations that are undeniably opposed to God.

So where I want to go is this: in these passages and many others, wherever Jesus went he gathered people together.

I mean, there were many marks of Jesus that are often highlighted and they are *all* are vitally important.

His teaching and preaching; Jesus was an amazing communicator, speaking the word of God, talking about God's rule.

His miracles and acts of power in the Spirit; healing, bringing people back life and driving out evil spirits and demons.

His resolve to do His Father's will in the face of temptation and to the very end on torturous Roman cross. The Bible consistently says that Jesus died on the cross for your sin and my sin.

What we often miss is that Jesus was so concerned about gathering a people to himself.

That was all part of Jesus' plan.

Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it."²

Often though when you say word 'church' all sorts of things go through people's minds.

When I talk about 'church' I means all kinds of churches in their different forms. There are home and house churches, true?

² Matthew 16:18

There are mega-churches and traditional churches and 'swinging from the rafters' churches.

There are café style churches and contemplative style churches.

There are small churches and neighbourhood churches.

So just quickly, ***tell the person next to you, all the different kinds of churches of which you have been a part.***

The thing is, these churches with their different forms and styles, all belong to Jesus. If they are centred on him and his words then it is his church.

Alongside that others thoughts go through people's minds.

It doesn't take long to discover that these groups, these churches, are so imperfect.

I mean, you know the stories.

There are recent ones in the media. Sometime they are right on the money (no pun intended). They are absolutely right in exposing what needed to be exposed.

It's deeply sad and grieves the heart of God.

Sometimes it's unfair.

And then there's the ordinary stuff that goes on.

The comments, the words, the insensitive actions, the cruel and malicious way the Christians treat each other.

It leaves a mark.

So some people say, why bother?

There is a made up story that describes Jesus' return to Heaven after His time here on Earth.

The angels gathered around the Lord to find out about all the things that had happened on Earth.

Jesus explained to the angels how He had lived among people, shared His teachings, expressed His love, died on the cross to atone for humanities sins, and was resurrected to declare that the new Kingdom is at hand.

When he had finished telling His story, Michael the archangel asked the Lord, "What happens now?"

Jesus answered, "I left behind a handful of faithful men and women.

They will tell the story. They will express the love! They will spread the Kingdom!"

"But what if they fail?" asked Michael. "What's plan B?"

Jesus answered Michael by saying, "There is no plan B. There is no other plan." ³

³ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (USA: Word, 2000), 165.

St Paul's Presbyterian Church is a part of God's plan for restoring and redeeming His broken world, especially the lost and broken people of this world.

We are a part of God's plan for this community.

We are a part of God's plan for New Zealand.

We are a part of God's plan for the World.

You see, there is the other side of it.

For me when I gave my life over to King Jesus and received his pardon, that was my first conversion. I was converted to King Jesus. I had another centred around the Holy Spirit, whom we've talked about recently.

I also had another conversion – around the church.

When I became part of a local church in Tauranga, I was embraced. I was surrounded and encourage.

Then I also read words this ancient text; words like “the people of God”, “the Body of Christ”, “the temple of the Holy Spirit”.

The thing is, these were all descriptions given to local congregations.

These local congregations grew out what we read this morning.

Another story come to mind.

There was a young woman who became pregnant and the father as soon as he heard the news.

Somehow it came about that she came to a church and wanted to present her child before for his blessing.

In was in the days when a woman like that can find herself shunned.

The day came and the woman stood alone before the congregation, holding her child in her arms The pastor – because can be a bit thick at times – hadn't recognized the awkwardness of the situation.

He came to that part in the service when the questions are asked, “Who stands with this child to assure the commitments and promises herewith made will be carried out? Who will be there for this child in times of need and assure that this child is brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

It was only then that he realized there was no one on hand to answer the question.

But without hesitation, as though on cue, the entire congregation stood and with one voice said, “We will!”

Philippians 3 verse 20 carries this idea that when we gather like this and in other ways around King Jesus, it is an outpost of heaven.

An oasis in the desert.

So what I want to say is this: to be a disciple of King Jesus is to be committed to other disciples of King Jesus, and that's called being the church.

I mean, if Jesus was so concerned about gathering people to Himself, and around Himself, shouldn't we?

That will mean a times being gracious and kind to people who we just don't get. It we mean learning to forgive.

It's tough sometimes.

The thing is, that grace we often talk about is comes to us to the form of others.

I mean, I am Reece and I need grace.

We could have an AA moment right now.

If it's not too cringe, turn to the person beside you and say whatever your name is, and I need grace.

I think that if we took the time we could look back on our lives see those moments when others stood beside us and with us and prayed with and prayed for us; who pointed us to the King and said to us keep going.

So to finish, when you do a message like this the response is often, "Reece, look, you're preaching to the converted."

Absolutely... but you will find yourselves in conversations with those who aren't converted and those who are de-converted away from the church.

So it's right that we move into a time of communion.

Jesus gave us – his disciples – a table to gather around.

It's not a table with just "Jesus and me, me and Jesus."

It is a table we share.

It is a reminder of what Jesus has done not only for you but also the person in front of you and beside you and behind you.

It's a reminder that at the heart of God's plans was this desire to gather people to himself.