

## John 13:18-38 - The Fickle Disciples

Earlier this week my dad was taken into hospital for an emergency hernia operation. It had been giving him trouble for a little while but being my father he didn't take much notice of it. Despite being 70 he seems to think that he is indestructible! That's why whilst battling with the symptoms and trying not to think too much about the pain, and with his wife away visiting her parents in Scotland, he began two DIY tasks in their bedroom. And he was continuing with those two tasks when the pain got so bad that he was admitted to hospital, leaving my sister, who lives just a mile or so up the road to have to go in and do the clearing up. Events had run away with him. He wasn't prepared for what was coming. And so when he went into hospital he left rather a mess behind.

Maybe you've known something similar, a time in your life when events took over and left all your best laid plans and schemes in tatters. Perhaps it was a sudden accident or bereavement, a letter out of the blue which forced your plans to change, perhaps positively even a wonderful surprise; when those things come we feel rather out of control, for a while at least. We weren't prepared: we weren't ready. But as Jesus makes his walk towards the cross and events escalate he is absolutely in control and he is absolutely ready.

Last week Philip took us through the beginning of chapter 13 and John's account of the last supper. Although the meal itself gets very little mention in John's gospel, it is the context of the Passover meal, the annual remembrance of God's great rescue of his Old Testament people through the sacrificial death of the Passover lamb, which gives the deep theological context to these chapters. Jesus is here with his closest friends, reminding them of his love for them by washing their feet, reminding them too of his ultimate purpose to be the true Passover Lamb, and teaching them firmly but gently truths that will give them hope even when it seems that everything is beginning to fall apart.

Our focus this morning is on the fickle disciples but with your Bibles open at John chapter 13, page 1081, let's first walk through the passage itself because there are a number of themes which stand out.

As I said two weeks ago chapters 13 to 17 are the longest concentrated teaching of Jesus anywhere in the Bible. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, not to the crowds, and not in parables, and given the proximity to Jesus' death, the teaching here is obviously important. Knowing that time is short forces us to choose our words carefully and not to waste time on fluff and nonsense. So these are big issues Jesus speaks about here.

So in verse 20 Jesus teaches them about the deep relationship between the Son and the Father and all who follow them. In verses 34 to 35 he gives them that new commandment to love one another in the same way that he has loved us. And although much of the passage is about his betrayal, in verses 18 and 19 he wants to remind the disciples that God is firmly in control so that their faith might even be strengthened by these terrible events.

But the ultimate focus is always the cross. Verses 31 to 33, which speak about Jesus being glorified, are all about the cross. The cross is where Jesus is glorified: He is glorified in his death. That's why Peter can't follow, because this is something only the spotless Lamb of God can do. As Philip said last week, before we can serve Jesus he first has to serve us and he does that by his death on the cross in our place.

With those themes in background in mind let's turn to the disciples and let's look first at Judas.

### **JUDAS: The Disciple Who Wasn't A True Disciple**

I think it's become more fashionable of late to feel rather sorry for Judas and try and find ways that explain his behaviour and betrayal, but I don't think the biblical accounts give us leave to do that. Whilst for most of the 3 ½ years of Jesus' ministry Judas Iscariot appeared to be a loyal member of the group, appeared to recognise who Jesus was, appeared to be willing to give all he had in following Jesus, the reality must have been that deep down his heart just wasn't in it.

Now of course all the disciples struggled to understand who Jesus really was and what he had come to do and they all had their weaknesses – we'll think about that in a moment – but Judas was different. He may not have been open

about his doubts and fears or active in plotting betrayal until after Jesus was anointed in Bethany (you can read about that in Mark chapter 14) but John's gospel tells us that Judas used to help himself from the money bag, so perhaps money and influence were his greatest desires all along. Either way these events reveal his true colours.

It seems pretty obvious that Jesus had known all along that one of his disciples would betray him. In John 6:70 he says *"Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!"* It's a strong word and one that might offend us, but Jesus is not only clear that one of his closest friends will turn against him, but also about the ultimate source of their rebellion.

Now at this point you might want to ask this question: if the Old Testament pointed to one of Jesus' disciples betraying him and Jesus chose the twelve knowing that, then did Judas have any choice in the matter? And if not, can he be blamed?

But whilst Jesus is clear that the Old Testament Scriptures do predict a betrayer, they don't say who it is. One of Jesus' 12 disciples would have to betray him, but it didn't need to be Judas. For whatever personal reason, Judas willingly enlisted himself with the forces of darkness. He was tempted by the devil, *'prompted'* to act in that way is the way John 13:2 describes it, but being tempted or being prompted is not the same thing as giving in. And Judas gave in.

The Bible teaches that we are never tested beyond our ability to bear and that when we are tempted there is always a way out, so like all of us who are being tempted Judas would have had ample opportunities to turn away from those temptations, but he didn't. Even at the Last Supper there are moments of great tenderness when his conscience might have been pricked, when he might have repented and begged forgiveness for what he had agreed to do. In verse 21 we are told that Jesus was troubled in spirit; upset, deeply grieved by the fact that one of his closest friends will betray him. That in itself speaks volumes. And when Jesus responds to the question in verse 25 by passing over a piece of bread dipped in the dish, that is a touching moment too. It was a great honour to receive a piece of food in this way from the most important person at the banquet, and so perhaps like washing his feet, Jesus is showing Judas the depth of his feeling for him and yet still Judas will not respond. He had a split-second to think again about what he was going to do: an opportunity to change his path and yet he would not do it. In fact it seems that being pointed out in this delicate way pushes Judas over the edge. John uses a strong phrase doesn't he, saying that as soon as Judas took the bread, *"Satan entered into him."* This isn't a demonic possession like we've seen in other parts of the Gospels. This is a cold, settled decision to reject Jesus and embrace evil.

And did you notice how that passage ends? *"As soon as Judas had taken the bread he went out. And it was night."* John isn't commenting on the time of day: he is commenting about the darkness of the moment; the fact that Judas had walked away from the light of the world and was now walking in complete darkness.

When push came to shove Judas gave it all up. Despite 3 ½ years with Jesus he thought he had a better offer. But there is no better offer than Jesus. All this world has to give: money, love, fame, pleasure, are as nothing compared to the eternity that awaits those who trust in Jesus. And yet it is so easy to be tempted and to walk away from the light into darkness.

Despite appearances, despite his years of strong service, Judas never really belonged to Jesus. He was called, he looked like he had responded, but his heart was elsewhere. As Jeremiah might have said: Judas had a heart of stone, not a heart of flesh.

So if I may ask a rather bold question: to whom do you belong? Are you really Christ's or despite appearances, are really you on the outside looking in? If your heart doesn't yet belong to Jesus then I'm thrilled that you're here. Coming to church is one of the ways to grapple with questions of faith – but don't assume you are a Christian just because you come to church. Judas spent 3 ½ years in a small group with Jesus as his leader- yet he wasn't truly a disciple. What about you?

Of course one of the difficulties of answering that often in our minds we have a ideal of what a true disciple of Jesus looks like and we know that none of us truly live out our faith in that way and I include myself in that. And faced with that difference we can doubt that we really belong to Jesus. But that's why I love the way the Gospels describe the disciples of Jesus. They are passionate but fearful. They are committed but weak. They are keen but hopeless. And there are times when I have fitted into every one of those categories, and if you've been a Christian for a long time that I'm sure you have too.

So let's look at Peter.

### **PETER: The Disciple Who Didn't Behave Like A Disciple**

But before we see Peter's failing, the first thing we need to see is the huge responsibility that all disciples of Jesus share: they have been sent by Jesus to represent both him and the Father. That is their job, and if we are a disciple of Jesus that is our job too. All Christians are supposed to take opportunities that arise to share the good news of God and are called to live lives of love and service, gentleness, humility and holiness so that when people look at them they think of Jesus in a good light. Christians are walking talking advertisements for Christ. That's a huge responsibility isn't it?

Part of that is to love one another. Jesus talks about that in verse 35. When people come to church or when they encounter Christians in their daily lives they are supposed to see people who love Jesus, who understand the gospel and who increasingly show a real servant-hearted, Jesus-inspired love between them. That includes a willingness to be open about our weaknesses and struggles so we can ask for and receive help. That means a gentleness and long-suffering when people are difficult to get along with, that you don't find out in the world. That demands a gentle and loving way of speaking about one another and to one another, without the usual backbiting, gossiping or slagging off that so often goes on between people these days. The church should be a place where none of things happen. That is a high bar to set, a great calling to aspire to - and it is one we find difficult and regularly fail to meet.

And that's what we see in this passage isn't it. Once again the disciples were slow to understand what they were being taught, too shy to ask the questions that are on their minds, and whilst Peter was bold in his declarations of loyalty unto death, he later failed to live up to what he said. It was easy to make great promises in the safety of what we might call the "Upper Room Christian Convention" but Peter ultimately had no stomach for the fight when things got tough.

And it wasn't just Peter who failed Jesus. When he was arrested in the garden they all ran away. Only John, it seems, was present when Jesus was crucified. And on the day after Jesus' death they were all in hiding, fearing for their own lives.

And whilst their failure here is so much more dramatic and painful, coming as it does around the death of Jesus, they had been like this all along. They had often been slow to understand, fearful and selfish. They had been just like us.

Because we are just the same, aren't we? Aren't there many times when we read something in the Bible or hear something in a sermon and we don't have a clue what it means yet we don't have the courage or the inclination to seek an answer? Aren't there many times when the Bible is absolutely clear and yet we don't live it out what we know to be true? Haven't you had times when you have been asked about your faith and yet you've shown no stomach for the fight? Times when you have fudged an answer, changed the subject, stayed silent or like Peter, like all the disciples on the night of his arrest, just run away? I know I have.

But those times of failure are very different from Judas and his betrayal. The disciples failed Jesus because they were weak, not because they were faithless. They ran away because they were scared not because they were false.

Now they may seem small distinctions, but they are not. Ultimately what counts is where our hearts are set: are our hearts set on Christ or the things of this world? Are we Christ's, or are we not?

Sadly Judas was not Christ's— so when he realised what he had done he did not repent. Oh he regretted it terribly, so much so that he killed himself, but that's a long way from repentance. The truly repentant person runs into the arms of God, not away from him. Peter, however, was racked with guilt and shame and wept bitterly. And when he had the chance he ran towards Jesus and Jesus gently restored and forgave him.

And that gives us great hope doesn't it. If Jesus can forgive Peter for denying he even knew him, then he can forgive us when we deliberately stay quiet or miss an opportunity to witness or when our lives don't match up to what we say we believe. That shouldn't mean we never try to witness – because we should want to. It doesn't excuse our moral failings or mean we can live as we like because if we are Christ's we will want to live holy lives, even if we struggle to do so. It does mean that we can have confidence that when we come to Jesus in repentance forgiveness and strengthening are there for all those like Peter, like me, who don't live out the mighty calling they have received.

And we can be supremely confident of that because of Jesus.

### **JESUS: The True Son Who Always Lived Like A True Son**

Where Judas was false, Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. Where Judas just seemed to be one of Jesus' true disciples Jesus himself was in a perfect relationship with his Father. And where Peter and the others were weak and ran away, Jesus was firm and stayed the course, even when it led to the cross.

You see Jesus isn't surprised by this dramatic turn of events, by the betrayals, the denials or the cross – he knew it was coming all along. He knew where he was going and he knew what it involved. He may have been troubled in spirit in this passage; in the Garden of Gethsemane he may have prayed for there to be another way and been so overcome with fear that he literally sweated blood, but despite all that he walked the way of the cross.

You see the cross is not a defeat or a terrible accident or a sudden unexpected departure from the plan: the cross is the plan. What's more it is Jesus' place of victory, of his coronation, of his greatest glory. His only crown may have been a crown of thorns but on the cross God's great plan of redemption was completed. Four times in verses 31 and 32 Jesus speaks of being glorified and despite the fact that he's thinking about the cross you can almost sense a growing enthusiasm and joy as he does so. Jesus willingly walked the way of the cross, willingly endured the pain and the shame because as he was lifted up he was not only being glorified, he was opening the gates of glory to all who would come to him for forgiveness.

And because he did there is hope for the Peter's of this world, disciples like me and like you, who don't always live like disciples. In fact the blood of Jesus is so powerful that even for those who have behaved like Judas and betrayed loved ones to death there is hope for them too. Whilst there is life there is hope, for even the foulest sinner or the strongest critic or the fiercest opponent if only we would come to Jesus.

Friends we live in a world which demands perfection and indirectly causes us to hide our faults and our weaknesses from each other for fear of being cast aside. But the gospel message offers us a different way. Whilst we are called to repent from our sins and live holy lives, we have a Heavenly Father who knows exactly what we are like and still calls us to come. Whilst we are frail and weak we have a Heavenly Father who sees when we fall and who not only offers to raise us up and wash us clean again but who dresses us in robes of Jesus' righteousness. And whilst we will battle against our sinful nature our whole lives we have a Heavenly Father who sees our weaknesses and by his Spirit gives us the grace and the power to change.

That is the good news of the gospel: amazing grace for the failures and the feeble and the foul, available at the foot of the cross of Christ for all who come to him.